

THE COMPLETE SERIES

DELTA

BOOKS 1-9



JOSHUA
JAMES

DANIEL
YOUNG

LOST MISSION

JAMES & YOUNG

FIRST CONTACT

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FINAL INVASION

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STAR FALLEN

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LAST STAND

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OBLIVION: THE COMPLETE SERIES

BOOKS 1-9

DANIEL YOUNG
JOSHUA JAMES

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BOOK 1: LOST MISSION

ONE

BEN

BEN WOKE IN A COLD SWEAT. He sat up, immediately feeling the effects of the previous night's drinking. The room was dark, but he knew he was in his quarters.

"Mack, give me the time," Ben said as he wiped the sleep from his eyes.

"Eighteen hundred, Lieutenant Saito," answered Mack, the UEF Navy's AI operating system.

Shit! Ben threw off his covers and swung his feet around to the side of his bunk.

"You are late for your father's party," Mack said.

"No kidding!" Ben made himself stand up. "Why didn't you wake me?" His legs were unsteady from the alcohol still in his system. He staggered a bit before finding his footing.

"You implied you would find and destroy my computing core if I woke you."

"And you believed me?"

"Best to be prudent," Mack said.

"Wait." A woman's arm flopped over to Ben's side of the bunk, only to find empty sheets. "Where are you going?"

Am I still dreaming? Ben looked back to see Corporal Brooks in his bed, half asleep. How and when he'd shared his bunk with her was beyond him. It had been a long night, and apparently a long morning as well.

"I gotta go. Feel free to, I dunno, make yourself some coffee, keep sleeping, whatever." Ben pulled up his pants one leg at a time, hopping as he did so.

“Why? Come, stay here with me,” said Brooks. Her short blonde hair was splayed out over Ben’s pillow.

“No can do.” Ben kissed Brooks on the top of her head. “I’m late to my dad’s thing.”

Brooks tried to push herself up off the bunk. “Wait, I’ll come with you.”

“That’s all right. Get some more sleep. I’ll be back in a couple of hours.”

“But you said...I thought you wanted me to come with you. You asked me last night.”

Did I? I really must’ve had a lot to drink. The old man would love that. “That’s okay. Sleep. I’ll be back before you know it.”

Ben went to the bathroom to throw water on his face. By the time he returned, Brooks was passed out again.

He grabbed his jacket and left his quarters. Like all officers, he stayed in the Officers’ Tower. His was OFC Tower 4, to be more exact. Unlike the others, it wasn’t in a cluster in the middle of the Naval Academy; instead, it was further out in the city. He liked the distance. Distance provided more freedom from the UEF military’s stern, watchful eyes.

It also put dozens of blocks between him and his father.

“Good morning, sir,” said PFC Boreman, a private assigned to elevator duty on OFC Tower 4. Ben groaned inside. The kid was made for awkward elevator conversations.

“Morning, Private,” said Ben. From his jacket pocket he took out a pair of vintage sunglasses: “aviators,” they used to call them. He put them on, hoping it would send a message to Boreman that he wasn’t up for chit-chat.

“Going all the way down, sir?” asked Boreman as his finger hovered around the elevator panel.

“That’s the idea,” mumbled Ben.

“What’s that?”

“Take me down to thirty. I’m gonna take the skyway.”

“Very good, sir.” Boreman pressed the button marked with the number thirty. The elevator spun around to the other side of the circular building and started its descent.

Ben tried his best to hold back the rising tide of nausea. Whatever had happened last night, it had involved way too much drinking. As he went over in his head what excuse he’d give his father as to why he was late, he threw up a little in his mouth.

“Long day, sir?” Boreman asked.

“Something like that.” With his pointer finger, Ben lowered his aviator sunglasses and looked at the elevator panel. They were only on floor forty-three.

“Are you excited, sir? About today, I mean.”

Please, kid, please just shut up. “What are you talking about?”

“The *Atlas*, sir. Are you excited for the launch? I saw it the other day. Boy, lemme tell ya, that’s some ship, sir. What I wouldn’t give to serve on that crew.”

I’ll give ya my spot for free. “Oh, yeah. It is pretty cool, huh?”

“That ain’t the half of it. They say it’s the biggest Dreadnought-class vessel ever built! The guns alone are bigger than most apartment blocks. You know, I watched it being built. I live near the docks. I must’ve been like nine or ten when they started on that beaut...”

Boreman went on and on. Ben politely nodded his head while ignoring him.

Finally, the elevator reached the thirtieth floor. Ben stepped out onto the multilevel streets of Annapolis.

Like most cities, it was overpopulated. Not everyone could afford to live off-planet; others didn’t want to take the risk of becoming a settler. There was always the military option that guaranteed decent housing, on or off the planet, but that came hand-in-hand with a five-year commitment in a time of war.

In order to compensate for the excessive population, cities had decided to build vertically. First came the apartment blocks taller than skyscrapers, made of concrete, rebar, and glass. They were no-frills objective-based housing for the lower middle class.

The richest UEF citizens lived amongst the clouds, literally. High above the rest of the population, they took up the top floors of apartment blocks or luxury towers. These folks rarely went below level fifty, because they had no reason to. That was, unless they wanted to vacation on one of the few swimmable beaches, or enjoy the rare patch of untouched natural earth.

All over any city were stacked homes and shops. These were mostly homemade unsanctioned housing, built off of or on top of other buildings. Though illegal, no one ever enforced the city ordinances against such dwellings.

Those who couldn't afford to live in apartment blocks, stacked homes, or luxury towers lived on the very bottom streets of cities. Little sunlight managed to filter through the elevated walkways of the upper levels and reach the city floor. Life down there was one of hardship, Bowery fever, and crime.

Connecting all towers, blocks, and homes was a system of elevated walkways and rails that allowed citizens to get from place to place. A century ago, humanity had tried the utopian idea of flying cars; that had ended terribly. Even though they could be confusing and were far more complicated, the crisscrossing streets, high-speed rail, and over a hundred levels were still safer.

Ben got out on the thirtieth floor, which also happened to be the thirtieth level of Annapolis. It was the level that provided access to the skyway, a high-speed magnetic rail line that circled the entire city. One of the stops was the naval base, where his parents lived.

The heat was punishing. Millions of cooling units across Annapolis did their best to relieve the long summers, but still, it was rough. Ben's hangover didn't help. He struggled to make his way through the crowds towards the station, about five blocks away.

On his short walk, Ben passed people from all cultures and walks of life. His nose was assaulted by the smells of street food and garbage. He stuck to the center of the street, away from the many shadows, pickpockets, and hustlers.

A long line of rail cars passed by overhead as Ben ignored various street vendors trying to sell him trinkets and knock-off jewelry. With the pointer finger on his left hand, he touched his ear.

Might as well bite the bullet, he thought. "Call 'mom'," Ben instructed.

TWO

BEN

BEN'S SURGICALLY-IMPLANTED HUD holographically projected the word "Dialing" in the upper right corner of his vision as he walked.

"Pick up, pick up, pick up," Ben said to himself. It was okay; no one thought he was crazy. With all the noise outside, probably no one heard him. Even if they did, they wouldn't care.

"Hello? Ben?" Ben saw his mother, Beverly Saito, appear in the holographic window in front of him. She was the very picture of beauty in his eyes. They shared the same green eyes, but she had light brown hair instead of his and his father's jet-black variety. They shared the same copper skin, too, but the rest of his features clearly took after his father.

"Hey, mom!" Ben had to shout over the commotion of the streets.

"Where are you? We've been waiting for what, two hours? The party started at four."

"I know, I know, I'm sorry. I'm on my way right now."

"Everything okay?" She had that trademark motherly look of concern. Behind her, Ben could see the party, if one wanted to call it that. Consisting of mostly military, it wasn't exactly festive.

"Everything's good, I just...I lost track of time, but I should be there soon. I'm actually about to hop on the skyway right now. Want me to bring anything?"

"Just you and your darling face, honey. Seriously, it would mean a lot to me. And to your father."

"Oh, yeah, I'm sure he'll be thrilled to see me. Especially now that I'm late."

"Don't be silly, Benny. Hurry up."

“I—”

“Hello, friend. Have you ever looked into the abyss?” A dirty-looking man stepped in front of Ben, interrupting his call with his mother. He had a long, flea-ridden beard and raggedy clothing. From the looks of him, it was safe to assume he lived on the streets.

“No. Can you move? I’m trying to—”

“Have you looked into the abyss? What did you see?”

“Sorry, mom. See you soon. End call.” Ben managed to walk around the raggedy homeless man.

“Have you ever heard of the Oblivion?” The man’s persistence ignored Ben’s polite refusal to engage.

“Yeah. A bunch of terrorists and crazies, right? Now, please, leave me alone. I got places to be.”

The man followed. He took a small hyper-memory drive out of his raggedy clothing and tried to hand it to Ben. “There’s no place to be other than the right side of history, sir. Here, see for yourself.”

Ben had heard of the scams before. Cunning con artists claimed to be part of the cult of the Oblivion. They offered unsuspecting rubes hyperdrives, claiming that it contained their bible, *The Tomb of the Abyss*. In reality, the drives copied all their information so that the con artists could steal whatever they needed to from their victims.

“No, thank you.”

“Please. I insist, sir. I insist, Lt. Saito.”

Ben stopped. He turned to the homeless man. “How do you know my name?”

“Take it. Please.” The homeless man extended his arm, with the hyperdrive in his outstretched hand.

Two officers appeared out of nowhere, clad in full gear. They grabbed the man by his shoulders. “Sorry, sir. We’ve had a problem with these cultists here on this level lately,” explained one of the officers, as his partner tried to drag the homeless man away.

In the struggle, the man dropped his hyperdrive. Ben waited for him to be dragged away and disappear in the crowd before walking over and picking it up. Curiosity told him he’d take a look on a secure console, see what was on there. But that was later. Right now, he had a train to catch.

Ben called for the time. It was 18:22. The next train was at 18:30. He needed to hustle.

Politeness went out the window. Ben had to make that train. He pushed his way through the crowds and made it just before the doors closed. As per usual, there were no seats, so he had to stand.

Magnetic rail cars were smooth; there were no sudden stops that required holding on to anything, so Ben just stood there, packed in like sardines with the rest of the riders. Everyone who had HUDs installed at birth, which was the vast majority of UEF citizens, video-recorded their day-to-day lives. Backed up to the state clouds, they were easily accessible not only by the user, but by the police. With safety and convenience came the loss of privacy, but that was deemed a necessity by the UEF.

Ben scrolled through the video to the night before. *Let's see what the hell happened last night.*

Then the unthinkable happened. A black screen, along with a message:

ERROR 475 VIDEO CAN NOT BE RECOVERED. PLEASE CONTACT YOUR LOCAL UEF CITIZENS' OFFICE IF YOU HAVE ANY QUESTIONS.

ERROR 475 EL VIDEO NO PUEDE SER RECUPERADO. PÓNGASE EN CONTACTO CON SU OFICINA DE CIUDADANOS UEF LOCAL SI TIENE ALGUNA PREGUNTA.

エラー475ビデオは回復できません。あなたが質問をするならば、市民オフィスに連絡するためにあなたの地元に連絡してください。

THAT'S WEIRD. In his thirty-three years of life, Ben had never had any issues recovering his life feed. He'd never even heard of it happening to someone before, but he didn't think much of it. Technology is convenient until it's not. Unfortunately, glitches were a reality.

The magnetic rail train stopped two stations away from the UEF naval base. Ben played music through his HUD, trying to work up the energy to attend his father's party while shaking off the headache and stomachache that came from a belly full of booze. His playlist filled his head as he watched a couple of people get on the train.

Instinct is a funny thing. Ben didn't know what it was about the three newly-boarded passengers on his train, or why, but they seemed off. Everything inside him told him to be on guard.

All three appeared keen to hide their faces. Two of them—men—wore baseball caps, and scarves up over their noses. The third, a woman, put on a plastic mask of a skull.

Ben reached for a pistol at his hip, but came up with nothing. *Shit! I left it on the nightstand.* Normally a UEF officer wouldn't go anywhere without their firearm. But, he figured, he was going to a party; why did he need to be armed?

"Behold!" yelled the woman in the mask. It got some of the passengers' attention, but not all. "Behold this great day!"

I can stop this. I need to stop this. Ben tried to make his way forward towards the three masked strangers. Squeezing his way through the street was different, and easier, than doing the same through a packed train car. He made little to no progress.

"You are all privileged to sacrifice your lives today. You will sacrifice your lives to the abyss! Rejoice!" The woman in the skull mask took out a baseball-sized metal sphere.

No! No! No! Ben recognized the sphere in the skull-faced woman's hand. It was a scatter grenade.

THREE

BEN

PACKED WITH SMALLER BALL-BEARING-SIZED EXPLOSIVES, the scatter grenade was specifically designed to maximize the kill zone and take out as many targets as possible in a small area. It was perfect to murder everyone on a packed train car.

The two men took out pulse pistols and started firing. High-velocity hot rounds were sprayed around the train car, causing a panic. Ben could see the super-heated slugs rip and tear through the unsuspecting passengers. Blood quickly started to pool on the floor, along with corpses and the wounded.

Ben didn't panic. He wasn't afraid.

It was worse than that. He felt helpless.

"Welcome the abyss!" yelled the skull-faced woman, completely unmoved by the carnage unfolding in front of her. She pressed a button on the scatter grenade. "Welcome, Oblivion!"

Ben saw a scared child, a little girl, standing over what he assumed was her dead mother. He picked her up, embracing her in his arms, and turned his back to the terrorists and knelt down. If he could only save her, it was worth paying a fatal price.

Two seconds after being armed, the scatter grenade exploded, sending dozens of mini-explosives all over the train car. Explosions erupted throughout the car, shattering every window and sending pieces of passengers everywhere. The train car shuddered violently as it tore free of the rail.

Ben held on tight as he and the girl in his arms tumbled throughout the car as it fell, hitting several levels on the way down. He was hit with dead

bodies, seats, railings, broken glass, and debris as he was tossed around like a single sock in the dryer.

At some point on the way down, Ben and the girl were thrown from the train car, and landed on a walkway on the fifteenth level.

Ben blacked out.

He heard the sirens of ambulances and police. His eyes—or eye; his left one was swollen shut—opened. People were running around, many over to the railing to look down at the train car below. Black smoke billowed up from the wreck.

There was a crowd of people standing over Ben and the little girl. A concerned woman reached down and plucked the girl from his arms. The girl screamed out for her mother, but all Ben could think was that she was alive. Somehow he was too, although he must not look like it. He could hear people asking him if he was okay, but he couldn't seem to respond. They spoke openly around him, wondering if the barely-recognizable heap of broken bones and ripped skin could be saved.

Ben felt warm wetness underneath him. It was his own blood. He was going in and out of consciousness. This was it. He could feel it. Death was swooping in to take him away.

Ben opened his eyes, but his vision was blurred. Yet through the legs of the growing number of onlookers, he saw a familiar shape. His eyes focused on it, slowly bringing it into sharp relief. He recognized what he was seeing now. It was the woman with the skull mask, from the train. She stood there and looked perfectly fine: not a scratch on her.

“Impossible,” he said, or tried to. It came out as a ragged breath.

There was no way that she could've survived, let alone doing so without being harmed. The grenade had been in her hand.

As if sensing his gaze, the woman met his eyes. She took off the mask and dropped it on the elevated walkway. Then she smiled at him.

It might have been the blood loss or result of his numerous injuries, but Ben saw the impossible. The woman's very being changed before his eyes. Under her skin, he saw bones and muscles shift around, reform, and rearrange themselves. Blood seeped into Ben's eyes, and he desperately shook it off. When his vision cleared, it was over. The woman was a man: a tall, skinny, pale man. His eyes were a deep, cloudy, churning black. He smiled as he picked up the skull mask and calmly walked away.

Ben passed out.

FOUR

LEE

“HE’LL BE HERE, LEE,” said Beverly Saito.

Her husband, Captain Lee Saito, downed a glass of Scotch.

“I’m sure he will. He always shows up,” responded Saito, before refilling his glass. “Eventually.”

Beverly took the glass from her husband. “Instead of brooding here, go mingle. This is your party, after all.”

Saito ran his hands along the sides of his close-cropped hair, once jet black, now mostly grey. His thick mustache matched it.

“After all the mighty Lee Saito has been through on the front lines against the AIC for the last twenty years, are you going to tell me that he’s scared of a room full of partygoers?” she asked playfully.

“At least on the battlefield, I know who my enemies are,” Saito said. “Out there?” He shrugged.

“That’s easy,” she said with a little twinkle in her eye. “All of them.”

Saito smiled, kissed his wife on the forehead, and left the kitchen. “Don’t think I didn’t notice you take my Scotch,” he said as he went.

She laughed. “Don’t think I was hiding it.”

The party wasn’t just for Saito. Generals, politicians, and members of influential UEF families had all gathered to celebrate the impending launch of the UEF *Atlas*. And they celebrated its mission: to bring a historic peace accord to the AIC capital planet of Vassar-1.

That was the official mission. The unofficial mission, if they met with hostility, was to launch one of the four world-ending fusion bombs and obliterate the planet. It would end the war, all right, and millions of lives.

Look at them, celebrating. Celebrating what? Saito politely shook hands, smiling and nodding at some of the partygoers as he crossed the rather large living room to the wall-sized windows on the other end. From there he had a perfect view of the *Atlas* as workers did their checks and made any final repairs and maintenance before the launch, which was happening in less than twenty-four hours.

How will they see this as a gesture of peace? Saito looked over the many visible guns on the *Atlas*. It was a dreadnought, a ship of war. That was obvious to anyone who laid eyes on it. Why wouldn't the AIC, the off-worlders, think the same?

Deep down, Saito knew that the mission was doomed. For the first time over the two decades of this Universal War, he felt that sinking feeling in the bottom of his stomach. It wasn't the liquor. Part of him knew, down to his bones, that he wouldn't be coming back.

Saito felt arms around his waist from behind. Beverly rested the side of her face against his upper back. "You're not mingling."

"It really is something else," said Saito, eyes trained on the massive dreadnought. "Something beautifully terrible."

"It looks safe." Beverly transitioned to her husband's side. She too stared at the impressive feat of engineering. "That's all I care about." She kissed his broad shoulder.

"I don't know, Bev."

"What is it?"

"It doesn't feel right."

"What doesn't feel right?" she asked.

"We're taking a warship, the biggest, most advanced warship ever made, to negotiate peace? The rebels, they...how are they supposed to take that?"

"But you're forgetting one thing," said Beverly. "You're the man in charge of the biggest, most advanced warship ever made. You'll make sure they know you're there for peace. I'm sure of it."

"That makes one of us."

"Don't look now, but it looks like Admiral Chevenko is going to give a speech."

This should be good. Saito heard the clinking of silverware against a glass. He turned away from the window. Chevenko was holding his glass above his head.

“It means so much to see you all here under the same roof, the Saitos’ roof.” Chevenko held his glass out towards Beverly and Lee. “Thank you. It means so much seeing all these faces here, some of whom I saw when this horrible war began. Others, well, they can’t be here anymore. Today we’re not only celebrating them, the ones we’ve lost, but we’re celebrating the future.

“This war has taken millions of lives on both sides. We’ve all lost friends and family. Twenty years...twenty years we’ve been fighting, all leading to this moment, to this mission, to that ship.”

“He’s drunk,” said Bev.

“He sure is,” Saito said.

“Peace is on the horizon. And our host, Captain Saito, he’s going to bring it to us. Not to put too much pressure on you, buddy, but we’re all counting on you.” Chevenko shot Saito a playful smile. Chevenko never smiled. He was *very* drunk.

Oh yeah, no pressure at all.

Chevenko raised his glass even higher. “To Captain Saito! To the *Atlas!* To the UEF!” He managed the last bit before needing to be helped off the chair and back to the floor.

“Captain?” A young woman approached Saito and Beverly. She was beautiful, and a stranger to both.

“Can I help you?” asked Beverly, protective of her husband.

“I hope so. My name is Aubrey Linus. I work for the *Herald*. I was wondering if I could ask you a few questions?”

Beverly was on guard. “We’re trying to enjoy our party. Maybe at another—”

“What do you need, Ms. Linus?” Saito asked. He was willing to do anything that would get him away from the fake smiles and insincere handshakes. Even talk to a reporter.

“I’ll get you another drink,” said Bev. She stared down the reporter as she left for the kitchen.

“I don’t think your wife likes me.”

“She doesn’t like reporters,” Saito said.

“And you do?”

Saito smiled. “Not at all.”

FIVE

LEE

IF LINUS WAS BOTHERED by his response, she didn't show it. "First of all, congratulations on being assigned this mission. I, and I'm sure everyone else here on Earth and throughout human-occupied space, wish you luck on your coming mission."

"Thank you," Saito said.

"Though, forgive me, but many are bound to ask: why were you chosen for such an important mission after what happened with the *Valiant*?" asked Linus.

Son of a ... should've known. "I'm afraid I'm not sure what you mean."

"Your command of the *Valiant*. Some say that it was a disaster that your failure to recognize the threat of AIC scout ships led to the attack that killed most of the crew. Some would question the fact that it was only you, your son, and a handful of officers who survived the attack and made it back home. Some question your skills as a leader and at the helm of a dreadnought, especially one as important as the *Atlas*." Linus waited for an answer. Saito knew her HUD would be recording the whole interaction.

"Tell me, Aubrey, what news site do you really work for?"

"I don't know what—"

"I'll still answer your misguided question," Saito said. "I just want to know who I'm actually talking to."

The reporter blinked. "I'm with Ulysses Underground."

Saito nodded his head. It made sense. Ulysses Underground was a movement that wasn't only anti-war, but also sought major changes in the UEF government. They weren't quite rebels like the AIC, but some would argue the opposite.

“I believe I was chosen because of my experience. As a twenty-year vet of the Universal War, I’ve been in the fight since day one.”

“At the battle of Europa, right?” asked Aubrey.

“That’s right. I was at Europa, Junos-5, the Belt; I’ve fought in all of them.”

“And with that experience comes the knowledge and instinct required to be at the helm of a dreadnought and command Marines, is that it?” the reporter asked.

“It means I managed to stay alive long enough to make my way up the officer ladder,” Saito said. He looked over Aubrey’s shoulder for his wife and that drink.

“I see.” Aubrey forced a brief, polite laugh. “But what about the *Valiant*? Many say that you were to blame for the deaths of several thousand men and women under your command, your first command.”

Stay calm, he told himself. Choose your words wisely. You got yourself into this.

“Events on the *Valiant* have been well-documented. We were ambushed by a well-disguised enemy. I did everything in my power to save as many of my crew as I possibly could.” Saito gave a composed, rehearsed answer. It wasn’t the first time he’d been questioned about the *Valiant*.

“So you didn’t make any mistakes? Any errors in judgment?”

A scene replayed in Saito’s head.

“Close the hatch!” shrieked Lt. Gregories. A fire had broken out on the *Valiant* after the ambush. It spread from section to section, burning the poor souls who weren’t already sucked out into the vacuum of space after the initial attack.

“You can’t do that!” screamed Saito’s son Ben. “There’s still people on the ship. We can’t just leave them!”

“We have to! Unless you want all of us to die!”

“Coward!” yelled Ben. He turned to his father. “Please, Captain, dad, we can’t do this. It’s not right. We can’t just leave them here to die.”

Lee remembered looking through the porthole on the hatch. Members of his crew tried their hardest to make their way through the zero-g of the *Valiant* to the hatch, to the rescue tug. Behind them, dancing flames advanced rapidly, swallowing them up along the way.

Saito cleared his thoughts.

“No. I made the best decisions available to me at the time with the information I had. Unfortunately, that meant that some under my command had to die in order for others to live. I’m not proud of it, but I would make the same decisions again.”

“Regardless of that, and considering the events on the *Valiant*, do you truly believe that you’re the best candidate for this historic mission to Vassar-1?”

No, I don’t. But I don’t really have a choice now, do I?

“I believe that I was chosen by Admiral Chevenko to helm this mission for a reason. And I’ll do everything within my power to make sure that it’s completed successfully.”

Saito spotted his wife in the kitchen. It looked like she was talking to herself, but he knew she was really having a conversation via her HUD. *Thanks for the save, Bev.*

“Now what will you do if—” Linus was interrupted by a waiter coming by with a tray of champagne. She took one. “Thank you. Where was I? Oh, yes. What will you do, Captain, if the AIC don’t give you the reception you’re looking for? What if they take it as an act of aggression and try to engage you and the *Atlas*?”

“In that case, we’ll respond with appropriate force.”

“How about the rumors of some kind of super-weapon being housed within the *Atlas*?” Linus had been working up to this question for most of the conversation, Saito realized.

How does she know about that? “I’m not sure what you’re referring to, Ms. Linus.”

“I’ve heard that there’s a weapon capable of leveling not only Vassar-1 with a single shot, but any planet. That weapon is said to be on the *Atlas*. In fact, it’s the reason it was built: to equip and deploy said weapon.”

“Whoever told you that is either gravely misinformed or lying to you, Ms. Linus. The *Atlas* has no such weapons on board. As the captain, I would know. It’s armed as heavily as it is because, like we just talked about, we may be received with hostility, and it must be able to fight its way out of AIC space.”

“If you’ll excuse us,” Bev said, a drink in each hand. “We have a party to enjoy.”

Took long enough, Lee thought.

“One last question.”

“I don’t think so,” Lee said. He could keep his cool, but his wife was another story. She would have scratched the reporter’s eyes out by now if she’d heard half of her questions.

“Captain,” Linus said urgently, “how do you respond to reports that the Oblivion cult has infiltrated not only the UEF military, but also your crew?”

Saito noticed two soldiers starting to forcefully push through the crowd toward them. “I hope you enjoyed the party,” he said, turning away just as the soldiers grabbed her.

SIX

LEE

“THAT ESCALATED QUICKLY,” Bev said, watching as the woman was forcefully walked across the room, one of the men murmuring in her ear.

“Who were you talking to in the kitchen? Was it Ben?” asked Saito, trying to steer the conversation in a new direction.

“It was. He said he was on his way. He was going to take the skyway. He’ll be here in a little bit.” She studied her husband’s face for a reaction.

Saito took a sip of his newly-received drink. “And what excuse did he give this time?”

“All that matters is that he’ll be here.”

“What matters is that I can’t...I need him to be my right hand up there on that damn ship. If I can’t depend on him to get to a party on time, how can I depend on him when it really matters?”

“He’s your son, Lee. Not only that, he’s a good man and a good soldier. He likes to enjoy himself; so what? Let him have his fun before going out there and risking his life alongside you.”

“You were always too easy on him.”

“And you were—” Bev began.

“And why did they assign him to the *Atlas*?” Saito hissed, more frustration in his voice than he’d ever shown the reporter. He downed the rest of his drink in one gulp. “It wasn’t appropriate for him to serve under me on the *Valiant*, and it sure as hell isn’t appropriate now.”

“You know how much Chevenko likes you. I’m sure he thought he was doing you a favor, having Ben with you instead of on some random dreadnought out on the front lines.”

“Yeah, he likes me. That’s why he had my son join me on this suicide mission they’ve concocted.”

“That’s bullshit.” Beverly’s normal friendly tone and demeanor turned icy. She looked deep into Lee’s eyes. “You’re coming back to me. You understand me?”

“I know. Sorry,” Lee said.

“I’ve never heard you talk like this.” She hesitated. “Is there something you aren’t telling me?”

“I’m just in a mood.”

“I know there are things you aren’t telling me. I understand that. But is there something more about this mission?” There was real fear in her eyes now. “Something more I should know?”

Lee suddenly wanted to tell her. He wanted the burden off his shoulders. “Bev, I—”

An explosion outside caused the floor to rumble and the windows to shake. Everyone at the party went to the windows.

Black plumes of smoke rose up from multiple points across Annapolis. From the Saitos’ apartment, they could see almost the whole city. Some panicked, mostly the non-military in attendance, as several more explosions erupted. All of them were small, but there were so many of them.

The red emergency lighting turned on in the Saitos’ apartment and the luxury tower itself. Sirens could be heard in the streets below and around the naval base.

“Okay, everyone, stay calm!” ordered Chevenko. His voice was slurred. He was far too drunk to take charge here, Saito realized.

“Call Ben again,” Lee said to Bev. “He’s out there somewhere. He probably knows more of what’s going on than we do.”

Saito put his hand on Chevenko’s shoulder and whispered in his ear. Immediately, the admiral hurried to the door alongside three Marine bodyguards.

“Okay, everyone, the building’s going to be on lockdown,” Saito said. “We’re not going to be able to leave for the moment, but don’t panic. This is a naval base. There’s no safer place to be.” He did his best to try and calm his party guests. Many of them listened. Others made for the exit.

There was another explosion. This one was much louder, closer. Saito looked outside. Down in the courtyard, by the docks, a fight had broken out.

UEF Marines fought with a force of about forty or fifty people in street clothes.

Damn, this makes things a lot more complicated.

“I can’t get hold of him!” Beverly said worriedly.

“We’ve got bigger problems right now. I need you to stay here with these officers’ families. Try not to let them leave.” Saito motioned for one of the attending Marines to come over to him. “Give her your sidearm!”

Saito disappeared into his bedroom for a minute. He came back out with a UEF-issue assault rifle, complete with a thermal imaging scope and packed with hot rounds.

“On me,” Lee commanded. The remaining military in the apartment followed him out the door.

As they went, Lee could hear his wife gathering the remaining family members in the living room. “It’s okay,” she said reassuringly. “They won’t let them in here. We’re safe.”

Lee took the steps two at a time, barely under control, wondering what he might find when he got to the bottom. They were halfway down when an explosion shook the whole luxury tower. Pieces of plaster and other building material fell from above in the stairwell.

Saito stopped and looked up. A fireball erupted on one of the landings above. He felt his throat tighten. He knew the floor. He sprinted back up.

SEVEN

BEN

BEN HEARD A STEADY BEEPING NOISE. It barely masked the muffled sounds of nearby chaos. His eyes opened to the neutral colors and decor of a hospital room.

Above him was a holographic projection of his body. It was broken down in layers, with highlights on the areas where he was injured. From the sheer amount of red and the fact that he couldn't move, he knew it was bad.

"Ah, you're awake, Lieutenant." Ben heard a woman's voice. Barely able to move his head, he turned just enough to see a doctor in the room with him.

"What...what happened?" Ben struggled to talk. Each word hurt his throat, chest, and head.

"I'm sorry to say you were in an accident. You're in a hospital. I'm Dr. Nelson."

"Is she okay?" asked Ben.

"Is who okay?" asked Dr. Nelson.

"The girl. On the train. I don't know her name."

"What do you remember of the train?" Nelson prompted.

"It wasn't an accident." Ben pictured the skull-masked woman. He could see her clear as day, and the pale man she'd become. "It was an attack. I need to—" When he tried to sit up, he noticed only one hand was bracing his weight. The pain was almost unbearable.

"Please, try not to move. It's important that you rest. I assure you, the military and city police have things under control."

Ben looked down at his right side. There was nothing but a bandaged stub where his arm used to be. Tubes and wires stuck out of his side and

back. Tears formed in his eyes, but didn't fall.

"You're lucky to be alive, Lieutenant. Your injuries were extensive."

"Show me," demanded Ben. He groaned as a sharp pain ran up his back. "Just show me."

Dr. Nelson brought up the layered holographic display of Ben's body. Using his left hand, he shuffled through them and brought up his skeletal system.

"You've broken eight bones. Here, here, and here are the most important ones. Your back was broken, but nothing we can't repair. We have you scheduled for surgery later today. So that's four ribs, your back, your collar bone, and a severe break in your right leg, fibula and tibia. Luckily, we were able to save much of the leg, but it will need a prosthetic casing. Your right arm unfortunately had to be amputated, your injuries were far too severe to..."

Ben started to drift off as Dr. Nelson explained what they were going to do to fix him and when he was being fitted for a prosthetic installation. Perhaps it was the drugs or just the trauma to his body, but he lost consciousness.

Ben woke back up to his father sitting in a chair next to his bed. His father was bent over, his face in his hands. From the looks of his clothes and the dirt and blood on his dress whites, it was clear Lee Saito had been through something.

"Dad?" Ben asked groggily.

Lee looked up at his son. For the first time in his entire life, Ben saw tears in his father's eyes. Instantly he knew things were worse than he thought.

"Ben." He got up out of the chair and sat down on the bed next to his son.

Where's mom? "Where's mom?"

"Your mother..." His father choked down his grief. It went down his throat hard. "Your mother's dead. I'm sorry I couldn't...I'm sorry."

His father put an arm around him and squeezed. Ben couldn't remember the last time his father had hugged him. It hurt his arm, but he didn't care. For the first time in his life, Ben cried on his father's shoulder.

"What happened?" Ben asked at last.

"She ... I..." Lee struggled to start. "The Oblivion zealots. It was a full-scale attack. Their target was the base, we think. We suspect they were after

Chevenko.”

“The bombing on the train,” Ben said stupidly.

“There were bombings across the city. Distractions, we suspect, so high-priority targets were on the move.” Saito sat back down, his voice stronger. He was on surer footing here.

“But what happened to mom?” Ben stared at the wall across the room, cheeks and eyes still wet. He was angry with his father for being so calm. Were a hug and a shoulder to cry on the extent of the warmth the man had in him?

He looked at his father, who looked down again while he gathered his thoughts. *Of course it is*, Ben thought bitterly. This was the same man who was more comfortable giving Ben orders than a pep talk. More comfortable in space than at home. Ben had seen it firsthand. Whatever love his father had for him or his mother, it was locked away somewhere that Ben wasn’t allowed to see.

And never would see, now.

“I...some of the terrorists broke through the gates at the base. I took some Marines to go help engage them, take them down before they got to any of the living areas on-site. What we didn’t know was that they’d brought drones.

“They were so outdated, so old, that our radars didn’t pick them up. The drones fired several missiles into our apartment, hoping that the admiral and I were there...”

Lee paused, and his voice broke as he continued. “Your mother was trying to protect the other families. She died trying to help people. She ... I’m proud. You should be, too.” He had a hard time looking Ben in the eyes. For a moment, he was vulnerable. For a moment, the grief bound them together.

Then his shoulders shifted back. His features tightened as he got up out of his chair. “I won’t be back for awhile. Your uncle Abel is going to take care of the funeral arrangements, since I won’t be around and you’re in no condition. Heal, son. Get better. When I get back...I’m sorry, Ben, sorry I let you both down.”

And just like that, whatever spell that grief had cast over them for a moment was broken. Ben’s father hadn’t let him down. Not yet. But he was about to.

“Get out,” Ben said in a calm, low voice.

Lee grimaced, then turned and left without another word.

With his one arm, Ben knocked the water and bedpan off the tray attached to his hospital bed. One of his IVs ripped out, spurting blood all over his white bandages. He yelled at the top of his lungs, screamed.

How did this happen? Why did they do this? Was it because of the mission? How am I going to get to her funeral? He's leaving, going on a mission after this? What is wrong with that unfeeling bastard?!

The anger burned as he flailed around, lost in self-pity and loathing. For his father. For himself. For the world. For everyone in the world—

Suddenly a vision of the old homeless man came to him.

That hyperdrive. Why did he give me that hyperdrive, and how did he know my name?

He rapidly pressed the red button meant to summon a nurse.

“Is everything okay?” asked a young nurse as she answered Ben’s summons.

“My clothes.”

“What?”

“The clothes! The ones I was in when I was brought in here. Are they here?”

She looked flabbergasted by his urgency. “In a bag in the closet. Why?”

“Can you check the pockets for me? There’s a hyperdrive in there that’s super important to me. Could you get it?”

“You really need to rest.”

“Please,” Ben pleaded with her.

The nurse took a deep breath and nodded. “I’ll see what I can do.”

In less than a minute, she produced the hyperdrive, still intact. “Here you go. It looks like it’s time for more morphine. Hold on one moment.” She injected more morphine into Ben’s IV. “Is there anything else I can get you, like water or anything?”

“No, I’m fine. Thank you.”

Ben waited for the nurse to leave his room before he turned his HUD on. It was a little glitchy, but still worked. “Scan hyperdrive.” The HUD informed him it was scanning. “Display,” Ben ordered.

His vision blurred. He squinted, determined to see the display.

What he saw took his breath away.

He reached for the call button again, but his arm wouldn’t rise. His eyelids drooped.

This isn't normal. Something is wrong.

His mind raced. It hadn't been time for more morphine, he realized. The nurse must have given him something else.

His last thought, as he blacked out, was to wonder if he'd ever wake up. Because if he didn't, and if what he'd just seen on the hyperdrive was true, then everyone on the *Atlas* was dead.

And everyone on Earth might be next.

EIGHT

LEE

CAPTAIN SAITO GLANCED at the time on the far side of the bridge, then did a double take. He jumped to his feet and, after a quick look at the navigation console, said, “Commander, you have the bridge.”

“Yes, sir,” Commander Jake Rollins said. He barely had the words out of his mouth before Saito was halfway across the bridge. “But we jump in —”

“You don’t need me for first sequence, Rollins. And this will only take a second.”

“Very well, sir.”

“I’ll be in my quarters,” Saito said just as the doors started to close. “Contact me at fifteen minutes.”

Four minutes later, Saito sat at his desk and closed his eyes to reveal a floating image of a flashing red exclamation point, holographically projected by his HUD. His head was in his hands, short grey hair between his fingers.

All around him, Saito heard the low ever-present hum of the *Atlas*’ engines. It wasn’t enough to drown out his own thoughts and regrets. Nor was it enough to distract him from the memory of his lost family.

You can’t run from this, Ben had said. But it turned out he was wrong.

Saito shook the thought away. He was here for the mission. It had to be this way. He looked up. His quarters on the *Atlas* were drab, almost bare. That wasn’t by regulation. An officer was afforded more freedom and comfort than a standard crewmember. He wasn’t convinced he deserved either; not to mention, he couldn’t afford any distractions.

“Open link,” he said at last. The image of the red flashing exclamation point disappeared. It was replaced with a live video stream.

A single drone hovered above the attendees in St. Lazarus Church. Saito’s brother-in-law had spared no expense. This was the same church that General Isaac’s funeral had been in, the largest in Annapolis.

None of the ornate decorations, timeless murals painted by modern masters, or the organ that cost more than an apartment block mattered. Neither did the attendees who came to see his wife Beverly off. The only person that mattered now sat in a wheelchair in the front row.

“Zoom in.” Saito watched the video stream with his hand over his mouth, eyes fighting the tears that begged to be let loose. The drone moved in a little closer.

A song was being played, something sad. Saito wasn’t listening; his focus was on his wife. Even in death, all he could think was how beautiful she was.

Saito wanted to reach through time and space and touch Beverly for the last time. He wanted his last memory, sad as it was, to be planting a kiss on her lifeless forehead and telling her one last time how much he loved her. His last memory was holding her limp body, covered in blood, dirt, and rubble, her staring up at him, her perfect green eyes wide with fear.

Lee’s son, Ben, wheeled up in his chair.

“Zoom in,” he said again.

Even from above, Saito could see the shine from his son’s prosthetic arm and leg. Ben stopped by Beverly’s coffin and placed a stuffed bear inside.

Ben hated his father. That predated Beverly’s death, but it was only in sharper relief now. Lee understood, and didn’t blame him. The attacks had given new impetus to the mission for the *Atlas*. Not only could it not fail, but it must start immediately. Lee had left the next day, unable to grieve the death of his wife. Unable to be there to comfort his son.

Nobody had made Lee go. If half the command structure in Annapolis wasn’t seriously jeopardized by the attacks, somebody would have forced him to stay.

But that would mean forgoing his command. His mission. His ship.

His duty was clear. The desperate need to end twenty years of fighting with the AIC was now more important than ever, but his son didn’t see it as a sense of duty. Ben saw it as cowardice. As far as he was concerned, his

father was running away. The worst part was that Lee wasn't sure his son was wrong.

Like his father, Lee was no stranger to burying his emotions deep. It had served him well as a leader of men. Emotion had no place in battle. But he had long ago faced the truth. He simply wasn't equipped to properly handle things like grief, sadness, or guilt.

A yellow flashing exclamation point appeared next to the video stream in Saito's HUD. At first he ignored it.

"Zoom in, times two." Saito needed one last look. The drone's camera whirred as it focused in on Beverly Saito. "Goodbye, Bev. God, I love you, and I'm so sorry."

"Reduce feed," he said at last. "And answer call."

Rollins appeared in a window via video call. He was about to start talking until he saw the look on his captain's face.

"Everything okay sir?" asked Rollins.

"Fine, Commander. Just fine. Is it time?" Saito asked.

Rollins nodded. "Fifteen minutes until the fold, sir."

NINE

LEE

SAITO SIGHED as he stood up. His knees ached. Time was finally catching up with him. He stretched his back, which was stiff, sore. *Age isn't just a number.* Now in his early sixties, he was in great shape, but six decades of life took a toll.

How the hell did we get here?

For twenty years the UEF had been at war with the AIC. They hadn't always been enemies, though. The conflict had started, like virtually all others, over rare minerals and metals in uncharted space.

At first, mankind was limited by the inability to travel the immense distances between stars. Habitable planets were few and far between. The United Earth Federation—UEF—was formed to help tackle the challenges humanity faced. Governments from all over the world pooled their resources to find a solution to their space travel problem.

And it worked.

A breakthrough was made when a scientist with radical beliefs, Henri DePaul, discovered a way to fold time and space to allow travel between billions of light years in a matter of minutes. Most of the details of his breathtaking discovery remained a mystery. Partly, that was down to DePaul's eccentricities. He was initially celebrated for his contribution to science and humanity, but it took less than a decade for all that goodwill to burn off and his unorthodox beliefs to get him ostracized. He'd founded a religion, called "The Oblivion," that grew more and more radical every year, though it was fair to say their methods only turned violent after he passed.

Generations came and went. Some of those were born and raised on a recovering Earth; others only knew space, and planets far from humanity's cradle. Feeling disconnected from the species' home, they grew resentful of having to follow the same laws, pay the same taxes, fall under a government so far away.

The creation of the Alliance of Independent Civilizations, or AIC, was bloodless. An agreement was made between them and the UEF. As long as the AIC continued to provide a steady stream of raw rare materials from the edge of charted space and beyond, they stayed independent, governed themselves. That peace held for almost two hundred years.

Henri DePaul's religion, the Oblivion, grew. But as the AIC forged their own identity in the cosmos, the Oblivion, now designated a cult, pursued their own goals. They began to destroy mining facilities on the edges of unknown space. The supply of rare metals and materials started to dry up, thanks to a combination of mismanagement and Oblivion attacks.

The UEF saw the AIC's inability to deal with the Oblivion threat as an attack on themselves. Right or wrong, they'd insisted on sending their own formidable military to take care of the situation for them.

AIC member planets rebelled against the foreign invasion. Guerrilla-style attacks became the norm. Somewhere along the line, the Oblivion receded. The attacks stopped, but the damage was already done. The UEF was convinced the AIC had aided the attacks. Soon, the UEF and AIC were in open hostilities with each other. What the AIC lacked in firepower, they made up for in tenacity. After two decades and hundreds of millions of deaths and even more resentment between the two sides, a stalemate of a sort had been reached. The Oblivion reemerged as a shell of its former self, renouncing violence and embracing peace. That seemed to be the signal for all sides to come to the table.

And now it was time to formalize it. The *Atlas* was headed to Vassar-1 to broker peace.

Or bring the AIC to its knees, Saito thought as he walked out of his quarters.

TEN

LEE

“SIR,” Saito was immediately greeted by the two Marines stationed outside his door. They fell in behind him as he headed for the bridge.

The corridors of the *Atlas* were busy that morning. Everyone was preparing for the fold that would bring them into AIC space. Just wide enough to fit four people walking side-by-side, the main corridors were still wider than on most Dreadnought-class warships. Lights lined the corners where the walls met the ceiling and floor. A metal-grated floor provided grip for the standard-issue boots that everyone on board wore.

“Let’s stop here,” Saito told the Marines as he reached the engineering deck. “I want to check in.”

“Sir, time is tight.”

“Understood.”

“Captain.” Chief Engineer Molly Liu stood at attention and saluted. Her small stature defied her sizable responsibility. The capable officer commanded the engineering staff, and made sure the largest warship in UEF history kept running. “We didn’t expect you.”

“At ease, chief. Everything set for our fold?” Saito surveyed what he could see of the activity buzzing around.

“We’re good to go, sir. We had that minor hiccup with the repeater in the main drive, but I took care of that last night.” Molly wiped the sweat and grease from her very young-looking face. With so much technology working hard in a confined space, the engineering rooms were always an oven.

“Good. Very good.” Saito nodded his head. “Well, get your people strapped in and ready. We go in ten minutes.”

“Outstanding.” Liu saluted Saito with a grin before hurrying away to round up her staff.

Saito’s guards hurried him towards the secured transport that ran the length of the ship. He didn’t have time to walk to the bridge; it was almost two kilometers away.

Saito looked out the thick multilayered windows of the on-board transport as it ran across rails towards the front of the *Atlas*. Technically inside the ship, it ran next to a set of exterior supports, giving a clear view of space.

Saito stared at Earth. It looked so close, but distance in space was deceiving. Countless satellites circled around it, along with launch stations and flight decks just barely within the planet’s orbit. Nothing, except for his wife and son, was ever that beautiful.

With their backs to Saito, the Marines guarding him didn’t notice him bringing up a picture in his HUD. He looked at it before every mission, as a motivator. Considering his family circumstances, it meant a little more that morning.

The picture had been taken when Ben was seven or eight. Saito and Beverly had taken him to the beach, specifically the boardwalk. Ben had really wanted a stuffed animal, and the only way to get one was to knock down a stack of milk cans with a baseball.

Saito knew the carnival game was rigged. Everyone knew it. If it wasn’t, they’d have to give up far too many stuffed animals and t-shirts to remain a viable business. But Ben wanted a prize, and he’d do anything for his son.

As he looked at the picture, Saito realized that it wasn’t true; he wouldn’t do anything for his son. Ben was in the hospital, having not only lost an arm and a leg, but also his mother. The next day, the next morning, he’d left him, alone.

The transport stopped at the door to the bridge airlock. Once inside, it shut behind him, cycled air, and waited for the interior hatch to open.

The bridge was one of the largest spaces on the *Atlas*. A massive projected curved digital video screen, with an area of about six hundred meters, surrounded everything and everyone on the bridge. Its design was actually inspired by an ancient piece of technology, the IMAX screen. Dozens of cameras, set up around the front of the ship, served as an almost

180-degree viewing window, while keeping those inside behind the powered dreadnought armor.

Saito took his command seat. “Where are we?”

“Full fold protocol has begun, sir,” said the tactical officer behind him.

“Very well.”

There were two seats just below Saito’s. They belonged to the *Atlas*’ pilots, Lieutenant Ronaldo Sousa and the lead, Major Anastasia Chevenko. Unlike the captain’s controls, which were all accessed via his HUD – and his alone, per UEF security protocols – theirs were physical and attached to their chairs themselves.

“Captain,” greeted Sousa. Like most pilots, he was a small man, and like all UEF military, he was fit. But unlike most, he wore a long beard dyed blond, the result of some religious exemption that Saito doubted he adhered to. The free soul of the *Atlas* took his seat and signed in.

“Spin up the engines,” Saito said.

“Sir, yes, sir.” Sousa put on his mag bracelets and activated the small metal plates in the back of his standard-issue UEF uniform.

Chevenko nodded to Saito and Sousa as she sat down in her seat and put on her mag bracelets.

“Major, open comms, give the order, and hand over the mic,” ordered Saito as, via his HUD, he went through the standard procedures leading up to a fold. Each wave of his hand checked off another item on the required list.

“This is Major Chevenko, lead pilot of the *Atlas*. All crew apply mag bracelets and prep for fold jump. Fold in two minutes.”

The other crew on the *Atlas*’ bridge took their seats and positions around the room. Everyone was tense, though many of them had jumped countless times. Practically every mission required it. Still, if somebody didn’t dot an “i” or cross a “t,” their atoms would be scattered across the universe.

“Crew of the *Atlas*, this is your captain, Lee Saito. You don’t need me to tell you how important our mission is, but I’m going to anyway. Every one of you has the chance here to be a part of history. Be a part of a new chapter of history after a long war that has cost all of us...” Beverly Saito’s dead body flashed through Saito’s mind, her fear and confusion forever captured in her dead eyes. “It’s cost everyone so much, and it’s time to heal. I ask of you the same that every soldier is asked the second they put on this

uniform. I ask for your best: nothing more, nothing less. Just your best.” He paused. “Prepare for imminent fold jump. Bridge out.”

As the Bender engines spun up, the whole ship vibrated. The main lights in the *Atlas* went off in order to divert as much power as possible to the fold jump. Red emergency lighting replaced them. The screen on deck went off, leaving them blind.

“Fold in T-minus ten seconds. Activating magnetic restraints.” Chevenko turned on the restraints meant to keep passengers safely in place. There was a buzzing noise, and every seated crewmember was pulled back into their seats, arms pinned to the armrests by the wrists.

“Fold in five, four...” As Chevenko counted down, Lee felt the same tingling sensation that everyone on board the *Atlas* felt. The hair on his arms and neck stood on end. Next came the instant nausea; hence the Be Wells. He gripped his chair’s armrests tightly. The moment of jump was the worst part.

“One.”

ELEVEN

ADA

WAR HAD a nasty way of robbing the young of their futures. PFC Ada Ericsson was one who'd had hers cruelly wrenched away. Less than a year earlier, she had just graduated law school in Stockholm and was on her way to a cushy job anywhere she wanted. Now she was leaving a mess hall on a flying fortress bound for the capital planet of the government that her own had been at war with for over twenty years.

"So this is your first time?" asked Ada's one and only friend on board the *Atlas*, PFC Tanya Martin.

"Hmmm?" Ada was so lost in her own head she didn't hear her friend.

"First time doing the ol' fold jump?"

"Is it that obvious?" asked Ada as she took her seat. They were in the Marines' headquarters inside the *Atlas*. Just off the ship's docking bay, it held the majority of Marines on board and provided more than enough seats, all in lined up rows meant for the fold jump.

"This is Major Chevenko, lead pilot of the *Atlas*. All crew apply mag bracelets and prep for fold jump. Fold in two minutes."

I'm not ready for this. How did I get here?

Ada found her thoughts drifting away to a year prior, almost to the day. She was home, just outside Stockholm, celebrating her graduation from law school.

"To my lovely, brilliant daughter, Ada." Ada's father Gustaf proposed a toast, glass of champagne from a newly-opened bottle in hand. Gustaf made eye contact with her as he smiled with immense pride. "When I look at you, I still see that rambunctious, willful little girl. But not for long. After tomorrow I shall see a woman, smarter than myself and more driven than

any person I've ever known. Words cannot convey how proud I am of you and how much I love you."

Ada remembered crying. Normally a tough woman, she couldn't stop herself. It wasn't so much the situation, or even her father's words, as kind as they were. It was the fact that her mother wasn't there to witness any of it.

Drafted, her mother had died on a UEF warship somewhere in space. Ada and her father were never told exactly where, just that their ship was lost during a battle with the AIC. Ada was eight years old. That was part of the reason she had gone into law school.

According to UEF law, citizens couldn't be drafted if they were enrolled at a university. Once out of university, any college-educated citizen who was employed in their studied field was also exempt. Ada and her family had thought she was safe.

"So, a toast to my brilliant Ada," Gustaf looked around his family cabin's dining room. Aunts, uncles, and cousins were all there to celebrate Ada's success.

As if God himself were mocking Ada, it was in that moment, as she downed her champagne, that she got an incoming message on her HUD. It was from the UEF Military Services.

"Hey," snapped Martin, bringing Ada out of her thoughts. "What're you waiting for? Get those mag bracelets on. Trust me, you'll need them."

"How long does it take?" asked Ada.

"Don't worry, it's quick."

"I heard it feels...strange."

Martin laughed. "No shit, it feels strange. We're breaking the laws of physics and traveling billions of light years in minutes."

Ada could feel the sweat forming under her armpits and on her forehead. It only got worse as more and more Marines filed in and took their seats. She slapped on her bracelets.

"Okay, it's time to take your Be Wells!" ordered Sergeant Holly "Ho-Ho" Thomas as he stood at the front of the enclosed Marine HQ. The Marines all reached in the front pocket of their uniforms and took out the foil casings housing two small pills.

Ada reached into the front pocket of her uniform. The Marine uniforms were a little different than those of the naval crew. There were the surface cosmetic differences, dark green instead of grey. More pockets in the pants

and shirt housed ammunition. They also carried stim shots, insta-bandages, morphine, and other medical supplies. Basically, they were equipped for ground battle or fighting aboard a ship.

Unsure, Ada held the pills in her hand and stared at them for a moment. Then she downed them in one gulp. Her hands shook.

Martin gave her a playful elbow. “Try and relax. This is gonna go a lot better if you aren’t freaking out.”

“Do the Be Wells work?” Ada tried not to pay attention to Thomas closing and locking the doors to Marine HQ.

“Sort of. They say they’re supposed to lessen the nausea and just plain weirdness you feel after the jump. But I think they’re just placebos, ya know? Sugar pills.”

Ada and the rest of the Marines on board heard the voice of their captain.

“Crew of the *Atlas*, this is your captain, Lee Saito. You don’t need me to tell you how important our mission is, but I’m going to anyway. Every one of you has the chance here to be a part of history. Be a part of a new chapter of history after a long war that has cost all of us ... It’s cost everyone so much, and it’s time to heal. I ask of you the same that every soldier is asked the second they put on this uniform. I ask for your best: nothing more, nothing less. Just your best.” He paused. “Prepare for imminent fold jump. Bridge out.”

“Pep talk over,” Martin said. “Here we go.”

The Marine HQ was close to the engines at the back of the ship. It started to shake as the Bender engines spun up. They could hear the loud grinding and electric noise as they prepared to literally fold space and time. All the lights in the room went off and were replaced by red emergency lighting.

“Fold in T-minus ten seconds. Activating magnetic restraints.” Chevenko started the countdown over the intercom.

I’m not ready for this.

There was a buzzing noise, and Ada was pulled rather powerfully back into her seat. Her hands were forcefully parted from Martin’s, pinned to the seat’s armrests.

“Just remember, girl...” Martin made a point of making eye contact with Ada.

“Five, four, three...”

“It’ll all be over before you know it.”

The hairs on Ada’s arms and neck stood up. She already felt like she was going to throw up. An unpleasant tingling sensation ran across every nerve in her body.

“One.”

TWELVE

LEE

AS SOON AS they completed the fold jump, the screens and instruments on the *Atlas*' bridge turned back on. Everyone on it was greeted by the unwelcome sight of four AIC dreadnoughts, along with what must've been thirty or forty fighter ships. They were waiting for them.

"Sir?" asked a confused Sousa. He was turned around in his chair looking at Saito, waiting for guidance. Chevenko was doing the same.

"Call Commander Rollins," Saito ordered his HUD system. Within seconds, his second-in-command answered.

"Sir, are you seeing this?" asked Rollins.

"Of course I am, Jake. Let's not rush to any conclusions. They knew we were coming; we told them. This might just be a welcoming party set to escort us to Vassar-1." Saito wasn't alarmed; he was steady, calm.

"That's the thing, sir." Rollins wasn't on the main bridge, but in the communications and navigation bridge, the secondary located right below. "We aren't anywhere near our fold location. And they aren't answering."

"Try to raise them again, transfer comms to the bridge."

The *Atlas* didn't take any defensive or offensive actions yet. Neither did the fleet of AIC ships.

"Nothing, sir," said Rollins.

"Again," ordered Saito.

There was no answer. *This doesn't feel right.*

"Okay, listen up, people. Raise shields and arm the bow, port, and starboard cannons. Commander, inform the docking bay to prepare to launch fighters." Saito chose to follow his gut. Nothing about the situation felt right. He was fairly certain they were in for a fight.

“Sir, there’s a problem,” said Rollins. Saito could see that he looked concerned through the video call.

“Elaborate, Commander.”

“The *Atlas*’ shields, sir, they aren’t responding. We have no shields.”

“That’s not possible. Try again.” Saito couldn’t believe his ears. There was no way they would have let the *Atlas* leave Annapolis without checking, double-checking, triple- and quadruple-checking every system to make sure they operated properly.

“Nothing, sir,” reported Rollins.

“Stand by. End call. Call Chief Engineer Liu.” As Saito waited for his chief engineer to pick up the call, his finger tapped a little nervously on his armrest. His eyes were focused on the bridge screen and the AIC ships.

Saito saw a small slash of light near the bottom of one of the AIC dreadnoughts in the distance. Experience told him what it was.

Torpedo.

“Turn hard to starboard, man battle positions! We’re under attack!” ordered Saito. He ordered his HUD to change to one better suited for the fight that was coming. “Switch to battle mode.”

The general quarters siren blared throughout the *Atlas*, signaling to every crewmember that they needed to get to their stations immediately.

There was a very loud *bang*, and the *Atlas* briefly shook. It wasn’t the torpedo. From what Saito could tell, it came from inside the ship.

“Captain! We’ve lost the sticks!” yelled Chevenko.

“Say again?”

“Engines one, two, three, and seven are all offline,” said Sousa. “We can divert power to four, five, and six to turn, but our maneuverability is going to be severely limited.”

“Do it. Avoid that torpedo.”

“Roger that, sir, diverting power,” said Sousa as he shunted all energy from the downed engines to the ones that worked.

“Switching to manual, turning hard starboard.” Chevenko switched from the screens of the digital controls to the actual literal control sticks. She struggled to turn them and the dreadnought enough to avoid the oncoming torpedo.

Saito knew everything that was happening was wrong. Why was the AIC attacking? Was it all a trap to get the potentially world-ending weapons on board the *Atlas*? Maybe, but how would they know that they had them?

Only a select few were privy to that information. Where did that first explosion come from? Probably the engine room, seeing that so many of them were out at once, but how was that possible?

There was no time to worry about the myriad of questions. He knew he had to focus on the here and now, and that meant surviving the engagement with the AIC fleet.

“Fire bow cannons, full power. Launch seeker torpedoes and ready the anti-fighter defenses.” Saito got up out of his chair and walked forward, towards the screen on the bridge.

Light them up and make them regret engaging the most advanced dreadnought in human history.

Chevenko barely managed to turn the *Atlas* enough to dodge the torpedo. It passed only feet from the armored hull.

“Launch our fighters,” ordered Saito as he watched space light up with the unleashed firepower of the *Atlas*. It would’ve been beautiful if it wasn’t so deadly.

Saito had seen and engaged more than his fair share of enemy fighter ships. In his time he’d seen every maneuver that AIC T-34s were capable of making, and he knew their tactics by heart. That was why he thought it odd when the fighters with the fleet all moved in unison in their attack, like there was no fear of a counterattack.

Like a living wave of metal, glass, and highly advanced and destructive weapons, the AIC fighters soon engulfed the *Atlas*. They were everywhere, taking pieces out of the dreadnought like a swarm of locusts.

“Weapons free. Shoot those sons of bitches down. Even the *Atlas* can’t take too much more of this. Where are my fighters?” Saito knew things were going downhill fast. Without shields the dreadnought, even one as well-armed and armored as his ship, couldn’t withstand much more. As soon as the enemy dreadnoughts got involved, the fight was over.

I need to get us out of here. There’s no winning this fight.

“Where are—” The *Atlas* shook. “Damage report!” ordered Saito.

“We’ve lost the docking bay, sir,” Rollins said.

Saito’s heart sank. If the bay was compromised, the launch tubes were gone. So were the armory and the Marines’ HQ.

The *Atlas* violently shook from side to side. Chevenko did her best to keep the vessel under control, but was losing her grip a little more every second. A couple of the exterior cameras were shot, leaving large square

black holes in the bridge screen. Crewmembers struggled not to fall out of their seats.

Saito watched as the AIC dreadnoughts began their approach. He walked back over to his captain's chair and sat down. He had no more options. It was time to flee.

THIRTEEN

ADA

TO ADA, the jump had felt like a rollercoaster drop. The contents of her stomach swirled around like clothes in a washing machine. Her head felt light, and it was hard to keep her eyes open. She blacked out.

Ada found herself in a beautiful field of yellow flowers. They were dandelions. She would know; they'd been her favorite ever since she was a kid. Her mother had theorized it was because her hair shared a similar color.

When she looked above herself, Ada saw a perfect blue sky. The occasional ship would fly over, but for the most part it was undisturbed, not even by a cloud.

In the distance, Ada saw her boyfriend, Ivar. He stood still, not even blinking. A smile was plastered across his face, and he held out his arms as if to embrace her.

Ada's legs moved on their own as they moved her across the field of dandelions towards Ivar. Something compelled her to look down. She wasn't wearing her boots, but instead was barefoot. Her toes squished on wet earth soaked with blood.

Ada looked up and saw her boyfriend's position and expression had changed. No longer was he smiling; he looked frozen in mid-yell. His head was turned, looking over his shoulder, running away from her.

The field of flowers began to burn, but Ada didn't feel the heat. Despite her growing fear and apprehension, her legs kept propelling her forward. She was forced to watch her boyfriend's body burn; his skin bubbled and charred. Skin, muscle, tendons, and organs all slid off his skeleton, falling neatly into a gooey pile. His skeleton caught fire.

Suddenly Ada was thrown off her feet, propelled backwards, momentum only stopped by something hard and metallic. She fell down to what was a carpeted floor instead of blood-soaked dirt.

Ada pushed herself off the floor and looked around. She knew this place. She was in a funeral parlor in Stockholm. Her whole family, including herself, stood there dressed in black, looking at her, crying.

Behind her, Ada heard the creaking sound of something slowly opening behind her. Ada turned around to see a casket stood up lengthwise against a wall. It was covered in dirt that fell off as the lid opened, revealing the partially decomposed corpse inside. That corpse belonged to her mother.

In life, Ada's mother could've passed for her sister. Both were tall and in great shape, with long blonde hair that went down to the smalls of their backs. Ada had had to cut hers in boot camp. In life her mother was beautiful, with defined cheekbones, sapphire-blue eyes, and a smile that could make a heart skip a beat.

In death, the corpse that reached for Ada had flesh and muscle hanging off bone. There were no sapphire-blue eyes, only holes where they should've been. A centipede crawled out of one eye socket and into the other. Ada's mother's beautiful blonde hair was lifeless, dry, and grey. Lips shriveled and retracted revealed a mouth full of yellowing teeth, the bottom jaw just barely attached.

Ada wanted to scream, but found herself with no voice. She fell backwards and tried to retreat on the floor, but something, someone warm grabbed her right under her arms and forced her up. It was her mother: not the corpse, but the woman that raised her, that she loved.

"You need to get up, Ada. Wake up!" ordered Ada's mother.

"Get up!" Ada barely heard Martin's voice over the sound of the *Atlas*' sirens and the commotion of the other Marines.

Ada's eyes slowly opened. She looked up and saw Martin standing over her, holding out her hand. Her head throbbed.

What...?

Ada had no idea what had just happened. Last thing she knew, she was in her seat waiting for the fold jump. The next? She was out of the chair and across the room.

"C'mon, we need to move!" shouted Martin. She looked around, clearly panicked, then looked back down at Ada. "C'mon!"

Without knowing what exactly was going on, Ada knew that she needed to act fast, so she grabbed Martin's hand and let her pull her up to her feet. On the way, she felt a sharp pain in her back: not the spine, in the ribs.

"You okay?" asked Martin.

In no way am I okay.

Ada tried to regain her bearings. It was chaos. Her fellow Marines ran towards the exit, towards the docking bay. Others lay on the floor, unconscious or worse. Wires previously hidden behind the ceiling hung down, sparks threatening to kiss anyone who got too close. The emergency lighting was still on.

"What happened—" Before Ada could finish her sentence, the whole ship shook. She was barely able to stop herself from falling over.

"We're under attack!" answered Martin. She pulled Ada by the hand towards the exit. "We need to get out of here! People are regrouping in the docking bay."

We're under...by who?

Ada didn't fight it; she let her friend guide her out of Marine HQ. She stepped over her fellow Marines, some of whom needed help. She wrestled with stopping to give them aid as two medics ran past. Survival, something she'd never considered before, was all that mattered at the moment.

Nothing could have prepared Ada for what she and Martin walked into in the docking bay.

Pandemonium had taken hold in the *Atlas*' docking bay. No one knew what to do. Pilots ran to their fighter ships, alongside flight engineers, in an attempt to scramble them to fight back, repel the attackers. Marines ran around like chickens with their heads cut off, looking for some semblance of direction. The sirens that signaled an attack blared, mixed with the sounds of hundreds of people yelling in a cavernous space.

Martin led Ada through the throngs of people in the docking bay. They almost got run over by a fighter rolling towards the launch tubes, eager to participate in the battle. There was a loud boom, and parts of the ceiling fell down mere feet from them. Two Marines that had been standing there disappeared. Martin started to run, and Ada followed.

Ada noticed blood splattered on Martin's uniform. She looked down and saw it on hers, too.

"Do you have any idea what we're supposed be doing?" Martin asked a group of Marines huddled against a wall on the far side of the docking bay.

It wasn't that they were scared, just that they wanted to be out of the way. Whatever was happening, every fighter was being called upon to go out and engage their enemy.

"I have no clue," answered one of the Marines, a young man with a Texas accent. "All I know is that we can't stay here."

A horrible feeling formed in Ada's gut, like a storm of dread. Something terrible, *more* terrible, was about to happen. She knew it. Slowly she began to back up, towards some pipes on the wall.

"Let's leave," insisted Ada as she tugged on Martin's arm.

"In just a second," answered Martin. She continued to talk to the young Marine from Texas.

We need to—

Everything happened so fast, no one had anytime to really react. An enemy torpedo blew through the armored hull of the *Atlas*' docking bay. In the blink of an eye, there was a large hole that sucked everyone and everything inside out into open space.

Ada, purely on instinct, grabbed one of the pipes on the wall. She managed to pull herself towards it enough to wrap her arm around it, bearing the weight on the inside crook of her elbow. The rest of her body was lifted off the floor and pulled towards the hole in the hull.

It was impossible to hear anything in those seconds before the ship's automatic defenses against such an event were engaged. The change in air pressure was so great it burst one of Ada's eardrums. She felt the broken ribs in her back and chest being pulled and poking her organs. All she could do was scream.

Please God, please don't let me die here. I don't wanna die. I don't wanna die.

Ada's arm felt like it was going to rip off. The pain and strain were indescribable. She knew at any moment she'd lose her grip, her hold, and would be sucked out to a guaranteed cold, brutal death.

Then, as if her prayers were answered, it all stopped.

A thick metal wall slammed down from the ceiling of the docking bay, bisecting it. On one side, the ship re-pressurized and returned to normal. On the other, well, anything on that side was now the property of the cosmos. Ships, supplies, and even people piled up against it as they were previously being sucked out.

The lower half of Ada's body fell to the floor hard, knees first. But she didn't feel it. Instead, all she felt was an intense sense of relief as she'd barely just avoided death.

Then she realized that Martin wasn't holding on to the pipes next to her.

"Tanya!" yelled Ada, her own voice muffled in her head. In fact, the whole world was muffled, as if she was hearing it through a thick filter. "Tanya!"

Ada couldn't find her friend Martin anywhere. She couldn't find any of the Marines from before. A horrible realization came to fruition in her mind. They'd been sucked out into space.

They were dead.

FOURTEEN

LEE

“COMMANDER,” Saito called for Rollins.

“Sir?”

“Arm two stage four missiles. I’ll deploy them.” Saito kept his voice firm. Stage four missiles were space station or base killers, not usually used in ship-to-ship combat.

“Sir, yes, sir, arming stage fours,” Rollins said. “Armed launcher four and five, sir.”

Chevenko informed Saito of what he already knew. “Sir, we can’t take much more. One shot from one of those dreadnoughts and we’re done.”

“Full retreat, Major. Get us as far away from them as possible.” Saito gave the order, and Chevenko didn’t waste any time following it.

With only a few of the engines operational, it was a tall task to turn the *Atlas* fully in the other direction from the AIC fleet. Not to mention doing so would expose their rear, and those engines they had left.

“Full speed ahead. Put everything we’ve got into getting out of here.” Saito kept his eyes on the screen. The cameras shifted to the rear of the ship, so he could see the AIC chasing after them.

“Taking control of launchers four and five.” Through his HUD, Saito saw an aiming/bombardier reticule, meant to aim the armed stage-four missiles.

“Sir, if we fire those we’re going to be caught in the blast,” pointed out Sousa.

“That’s the idea.” Saito knew that they couldn’t outrun the AIC ships, not with their own ship lame and hobbling. But maybe they could get a boost from the stage-four missiles’ blasts.

“Everyone hold on. Firing launcher four.” Saito pressed a holographically-projected button through his HUD. “Firing launcher five.”

Saito watched as the two massive missiles made their way towards the AIC fleet, who didn't appear to take any measures to avoid them. Just the opposite, in fact. One of the fighters, a T-34, flew directly towards one of them.

“Shoot that fighter down!” yelled Saito as he pointed at the screen at the T-34. No one knew exactly what he was talking about, or who he was talking to. Maybe Saito didn't either. Even if they did, there was no chance they'd be able to do anything about it.

“Damn,” Saito whispered.

When the T-34 hit the stage-four missile, it instantly detonated, engulfing the enemy fighters. There was a blinding white light, followed by a blast wave that hit the *Atlas* hard. It was thrown into a spin through space at such high speed that the barely-functional artificial gravity inside the dreadnought had trouble compensating.

The power inside the *Atlas* flickered on and off. Crewmembers were thrown all around the bridge. The lucky just got scrapes and bruises; the most unfortunate broke bones or worse, and the ship wouldn't stop spinning and shedding debris.

In every rotation, Saito got closer to blacking out. He gripped the armrests on his captain's chair so hard his knuckles turned white. As he approached the black abyss of unconsciousness, Saito remembered the day at the boardwalk with his wife and son.

All that morning, before going to the beach, Saito and Beverly had had a huge fight. Despite how happy they'd looked in the picture, there was tension boiling beneath the surface. They'd fought about enrolling Ben, their son, in the Naval Academy. If desired, kids could start their life in the UEF military from elementary school on.

Beverly had argued that Ben was far too young to start indoctrination in military culture. She wanted him to have a chance to choose for himself what he wanted to do with his life, which included keeping everything as an option and not a narrow focus on war. Saito had felt in his gut that his son would be a great soldier, and a greater leader than himself. In order to reach that destiny, he felt that learning as young as possible was extremely important.

“Major! Get control of this ship!” yelled Saito.

“I’m trying, sir,” Chevenko grunted. She’d had trouble piloting the *Atlas* when they’d simply lost a few engines; now it was nearly impossible.

“I’m gonna ...” Sousa struggled to keep his seat. “I’m gonna try something. Sir, please order everyone in the port compartments of the ship to put on their oxygen masks. I’m gonna use the exhaust systems to blow the air out, hopefully counteract this spinning.”

“Got it, Lieutenant! This is Saito. Everyone on port-side decks one through eight, put on your oxygen masks immediately!”

There was no time to know if the message had gone throughout the ship. Saito nodded at Sousa. “Do it.”

Sousa’s hands danced across his console. Instantly, the *Atlas* creaked and screeched as its extreme spinning was suddenly counteracted by a force pushing in the opposite direction. At first, it wasn’t clear if it worked as the last of the gas was exhausted. But the spinning slowed enough that the dampeners were able to regain control.

The crew on the *Atlas*’ deck was in no shape to cheer even if they wanted to. Blood dripped from a long cut along Saito’s palm. It ran down the arm of the command chair. Dizzy, he almost fell over, but caught himself on his chair before dropping.

This...What just happened?

Saito, bracing himself by the back of the captain’s chair, looked out over his deck. It was in complete disarray.

Some of the *Atlas*’ crew on the deck lay on the floor, on their backs or stomachs, out cold. Others were injured. Several weren’t moving. The injured were tended to by colleagues. People shouted back and forth, making it harder to hear the still-present groans and moans of the wounded. Sparks flew from consoles and wiring.

“Commander?” asked Saito. “What’s our status?”

There was no response.

FIFTEEN

BEN

BEN SAITO SEETHED AS he sat in his wheelchair. He was dressed in a full suit, custom-tailored to accommodate his new arm and leg.

It was a strange sensation. One of his hands could feel the grooves and grit of the wheels of his wheelchair. The other hand felt nothing but artificial electrical signals that ran up his metallic, artificial right arm.

It hurt. Yes, most of Ben's injuries had somewhat healed, but his new leg and arm burned. Remaining nerves in both stumps tried to cement their connection with the wires of the metallic limbs, forcing the young former lieutenant to be on a constant dose of painkillers. He'd be out of the chair in days. In truth, he could walk just fine right now, but the head doctors were at the funeral and there had been no point in fighting with them. But Ben vowed to throw the damn thing away the moment he was out of the church.

At the end of the St. Lazarus Church aisle, fifty yards from the entrance where Ben sat, lay his mother Beverly Saito's coffin. A long line of mourners stood in a line, one by one paying their respects. Ben loved his mother and knew she was a great woman, but he was surprised by just how many people had turned out for her funeral.

You got this. You're not your father. She deserves a proper goodbye from her son.

Ben reached into his suit. In the inside pocket was a flask full of rum. He took a couple of swigs, then put it away. After a deep breath, he started to wheel down the aisle. He took his time. His mother wasn't going anywhere.

Above him, Ben heard a buzzing noise. When he looked up, he saw a drone equipped with a camera. He knew exactly what it was. The bastard.

Ben tore his attention away from the drone. His anger towards his father Lee Saito was substantial, but what he'd learned about the *Atlas*' mission made him fear for his safety. The last thing he wanted was to go to two funerals.

Ben only recognized a small portion of the attendees at his mother's funeral. He hated the sympathetic stares of strangers as he wheeled by. Some of them must've been friends of his mother's. Others were family he'd never met or had long forgotten. The majority, judging by their dress blues, were UEF military.

"Hello, Ben," said Father John Dent. "I'm so sorry for your loss. Would you like me to help you over to—?"

"I got it," Ben said.

Father Dent politely smiled and got out of the way so Ben could say his last goodbyes to his mother. Ben stood easily.

The bottom half of Beverly Saito's coffin was covered by a funeral spray. There were bright flowers in happy colors that didn't quite fit the situation, and their smell made him queasy. He placed both hands on the side of the coffin and forced himself to look inside the open casket at his mother.

She didn't look real. That was all Ben could think when he first saw his mother in her casket. Her skin was pale, very pale, but without blotches or any sign of decay, or the massive trauma she'd sustained in the terrorist attack that took her life. In life, her face had been full of energy and welcoming warmth. Now it was still, completely bereft of life. While quite well done, her makeup didn't make her look any more alive.

Ben couldn't hold it back anymore. A strong man, he'd told himself he would stay composed, and had up to that point. But seeing that shell of a woman that used to be his mother in person, up close, he began to cry. All he wanted, the only thing in the entire world he desired, was for her to wake up, to hold him, to kiss him on his forehead and tell him that everything would be okay.

With his metallic arm, Ben reached back into a bag strapped to the back of his wheelchair. From it, he grabbed a stuffed bear. It was the same stuffed bear his father had won for him at the shore.

Ben lifted one of his mother's arms up. It felt heavy. He placed the stuffed animal under it, then gently let it down.

After leaning over to kiss his mother on the forehead, Ben made sure to tell her: “I love you. And I swear to God that I’ll find who did this to you ... and I’ll make this right.”

SIXTEEN

BEN

“I’m afraid I’m not following, son,” said Admiral Chevenko. He took a sip of his drink. He, Ben, and a handful of the funeral attendees were at a small post-wake gathering.

“The *Atlas*. Its mission, sir. It...they’re in danger.” Ben was a little tipsy, but still had full control of his faculties.

“Danger? From who?”

“I’m not sure.”

“Forgive me, but I’m having trouble here. You say they’re in danger, but you can’t tell me how. You say that they’re walking into a trap, but don’t know why or where or from whom. I’m sure you know why I find this hard to take seriously.” Admiral Chevenko was only half paying attention to Ben. As they talked, he looked around the room, seeing who else was there.

“The Oblivion cult. How much do you know about them, sir?” Ben tried his best to keep his frustration at bay, which was hard. Not only was he understandably emotional, but his pain meds didn’t help his case.

“A bunch of crazies believe in nothingness or something and carry out cowardly terrorist attacks to get attention. How much more is there to know?”

“I’ve talked to a few,” Ben said. “They don’t worship nothingness. They believe in a force. Something like gods who live in the abyss or the dark reaches of unexplored space.” He shrugged. “Aliens, sir.”

“Aliens?” said Admiral Chevenko dismissively. “Don’t you think we would’ve run into them by now?”

“I know it’s hard to believe, sir, but I have reason to believe that their aliens exist—or at least, something otherwordly. And the *Atlas* may be

flying directly into a trap set by the Oblivion on behalf of these aliens. We need to warn them. My father is on that ship. Your daughter is, too!”

“I see. And you have proof of this alleged plot?” asked Chevenko, who finally paid Ben the common courtesy of his full attention, if only for a few seconds.

“I...”

Yes, as a matter of fact, I do. As I was on my way to a mag-rail train, a crazy homeless cult member stopped me and gave me a hyperdrive that contained all the proof you need. It’s only the small matter of a nurse drugging me and taking the hyperdrive, which means I have absolutely no proof, that makes me hesitate.

“No. Nothing solid, but if you give me a chance I can—”

Admiral Chevenko put his heavy, chubby hand on Ben’s shoulder. “I think you need some rest. We’re going to put you on medical leave until you have some time to heal, mentally and physically. Get your life back in order. After you do, the Navy will welcome you back with open arms. Then we can take another look at your theory about the Oblivion. I respect your father, your mother, your family. And I look forward to having you back to continue your legacy.”

The anger and frustration within Ben boiled over. He knew that what he was saying to the admiral sounded over the top and frankly unbelievable, but he hoped that a man who claimed to be his father’s friend would at least seriously hear him out. Especially when his father, his crew, and the most expensive advanced ship in UEF history were at stake.

“Don’t bother.”

Admiral Chevenko was about to walk away, and looked back at Ben. “Don’t bother with what?”

“I’m done. Sir. Consider this my resignation.”

I’m done fighting for those who won’t fight for me.

Ben walked out of the church, ignoring the well-wishes of several others as he went. He threw the wheelchair in a bush at the front of the church, spat on it for good measure, and limped his way home.

As it turned out, just telling an admiral he quit didn’t actually make it so. But after several more days of mandated psych visits and plenty of pushback, the combination of his injuries and his mental state were enough to get him an honorable discharge.

Two weeks passed. Of those fourteen days, Ben spent fourteen of them in a bar. On a particularly stormy Annapolis night, he found himself in a frowsy dive in the lower levels of the megacity.

“This is Paige Walker with WCNN News Annapolis, and we have breaking news regarding the *Atlas*...” Ben heard a newscaster’s voice in his HUD. At first he ignored it, and worked on his double shot of whiskey.

Now out of his wheelchair, Ben was free to roam wherever he wanted. But without a job, having cut himself off from all his friends, he used his newfound mobility to explore the slums, getting into as much trouble as he could find.

When in the Navy, Ben had kept his clothes crisp and wrinkle-free. Now he rarely changed his baggy pants and stained shirt. His hair began to grow out. He hadn’t shaved since the funeral. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d taken a shower.

“...has gone missing. The UEF has strenuously denied that claim and said that communication has continued through secondary means while the cause of the primary malfunction is under review. But according to anonymous sources inside the program, no one has been able to get in contact with the state-of-the-art ship. As previously reported, the *Atlas* disembarked two weeks ago, bound for the AIC capital planet of Vassar-1 on a historic mission meant to negotiate a peace between the two governments...” Paige Walker from WCCN Annapolis kept talking in Ben’s ear.

Ben downed the rest of his whiskey. After his failure to convince Chevenko of the Oblivion’s plot, he’d gone to other friends and colleagues in the military. None of them had believed him, so he’d gone to the papers. They didn’t believe him, so he turned to the bottle.

“HUD off,” ordered Ben. “Bartender!”

A holograph of a bartender with a handlebar mustache and a bowtie appeared behind the bar in front of Ben. Seeing that he wasn’t in the most reputable of establishments, the image flickered on and off.

“Wh-wh-a-a-t can I get y-y-y-you, sir?” The holographic bartender’s audio stuttered, as its projector barely still functioned.

“Give me another,” ordered Ben.

“S-sure thing, s-s-s-s-sir.” Above the bar was a series of rails. On one were glasses lined up to be vended out to customers. On the other were

upside-down bottles of liquor waiting to be dispensed. A bottle of whiskey was lowered down, the cap opened, and Ben was poured a drink.

“I got that,” Ben heard a familiar woman’s voice next to him say. “His drink’s on me.”

Ben turned to look at her. Something about her features looked familiar. But the voice. He *knew* that voice.

Then it hit him. This was the nurse who’d drugged him at the hospital.

“You,” he stammered.

She looked completely different than she had in the hospital. Her hair was completely shaved off; both sides of her head, as well as her arms and legs, were covered in tattoos. She wore a lot of jewelry, which looked mostly homemade. And she had eye implants, made obvious by the fact that her irises whizzed and whirred like cameras focusing. She must have been wearing lens covers before. They wouldn’t fool anyone for long, but he’d only seen her for a moment while he was in distress in the hospital.

She smiled. “Aw, shucks, you remember me.”

SEVENTEEN

BEN

“YOU DRUGGED ME,” he stammered. He started to slide off his chair, but she gently yet firmly pushed him back on it. He was way too drunk for this now. “And took the hyperdrive.”

“Take it easy,” she said, flashing the handle of a pocket pistol on her belt. “If you’re a good boy, I’m going to give it back to you. But if you make a scene, I’m going to walk out of here and you’ll never see me again.”

“Is that right?”

“It is.”

“So who the hell are you?” asked Ben, his voice slurred. “Not a damn nurse.”

“I’m a lot of things. My name is Morgan. Nice to meet you, Ben Saito.” Morgan held out her gloved hand for Ben to shake.

Ben stared at her hand. Slowly, he took it. She had a surprisingly firm handshake. “Ben Saito.”

Morgan raised one eyebrow. “Yeah, I know.”

“Not a real rocket scientist,” Ben heard a deep, gruff man’s voice from the other side of him. “But a hell of a drinker. We’ve tailed you to every bar in town.”

Ben swung around on his bar stool, then immediately regretted it as the world kept spinning. He closed his eyes, waited a full second, then opened them. He was greeted by the unpleasant sight of a man with long, dreaded grey hair. Half of the man’s face was heavily scarred, as if from severe burns. His black beard was patchy and grew around the scars. Two intensely blue eyes stared at Ben, unimpressed.

“What do you think, Ace?” asked Morgan.

“I think he’s ready to listen,” answered the scarred man.

“Wait...your name is Ace?” Ben laughed so hard he actually almost fell back off his stool. “So, so, let me get this straight. Your parents named you Ace? On your birth certificate it reads, what, Ace Johnson?”

“Glad you find that so entertaining. And no, my last name is Mendholson.”

Ben couldn’t take it. This time he did laugh so hard he fell off his stool. Using his metal arm, he pushed himself up off the wet, filthy bar floor, then sat back down on his stool.

“Well, that was embarrassing,” he said.

“No kidding.” Morgan was not amused.

“Okay, Ace,” Ben slurred. “What do you really want? I’m assuming you were in on what happened at the hospital.”

Ace nodded and glanced around the bar. He took the seat on the other side of Ben and laid a huge blaster up on the bar. “We know all about the Oblivion. We’ve seen what’s on that hyperdrive, too.” He nodded darkly at his friend. “Those schematics of the *Atlas* are just the tip of what’s coming. Whatever attack they have planned on the *Atlas*, it’s the first phase of ... something larger.”

Ben stared at them. “You know, don’t you? About the ... about those shapeshifter things,” he whispered.

Ace and Morgan shared a knowing glance. “We do.”

“So you know what the end game here is, right?” He finally had two people to whom he could say what he’d been thinking for two weeks and not sound like a madman. “It’s an alien invasion.”

Ace rubbed his chin.

“I think we should just cut to the chase,” Morgan said.

Ace nodded, as if he’d come to the same conclusion. “Here’s the thing, Ben. We were tailing the Oblivion group that included that homeless guy, the one who gave you the hyperdrive. That surprised us. Until then, we’d never seen a crack in the unified front of the Oblivion. You have to understand, they’re in thrall to the aliens. They live to serve them. It’s more than just normal brainwashing. Their neural implants are compromised, we’re sure of it, although we weren’t able to get proof before it all went sideways.”

“How long—”

“We’re covert ops,” Ace said. “Or were.”

“What happened?” Ben asked.

“Somebody sold us out on an operation, right after we got wind of the attack planned on the *Atlas*. Captain, four of our team, all dead.” He nodded. “Morgan and I were undercover when it went down. We were outside the op. We were about to come in, but Morgan here has good contacts off-planet. We got word that what happened to us was no outside job. It was an inside job.”

“What does all this mean?”

“We think the UEF knows about the Oblivion plan. We don’t know why they wouldn’t act on it, but for now, they aren’t. They’ve allowed the Oblivion to continue with their plan.”

Ben stared in shock. “That’s ... that’s hard to believe.”

Morgan smiled. “So Mr. Alien Invasion is telling us that our story is hard to believe?”

“It just makes no sense.”

“We tend to agree,” Ace said. “That’s why we want to get one of those neural implants and get the hell off of Earth.”

Ben shook his head. “So why are you telling me all this?”

“Like I said. We lost our captain, and we need a new one for our ship, the *Lost*.”

Ben knew it was the alcohol, but he couldn’t help from giggling. “Your ship is called the *Lost*?”

Ace ignored him. “What do you say, Ben?”

“Why me?” Ben asked. “Why don’t *you* captain your ship? Or her? She could do it.”

“Amen,” Morgan said.

“I’m not special operations,” Ben continued. “You guys know that.”

“We’re not either,” Ace said. “We’re basically glorified undercover cops.”

Morgan frowned, but didn’t disagree.

“Look. The reason we weren’t with the team is because we weren’t part of the team. We fit the descriptions needed for the undercover work. We were the play-actors, as far as the Marines were concerned. We’re both local cops.”

“I’m not a naval officer anymore,” Ben said. He realized now he was just reaching for excuses. It was all just too much to take in at the moment.

“Until two weeks ago, you were.” Ace shook his head. “Look, we need all the help we can get. There’s just two of us, and few people we can trust. You’re on the short list.”

“But if you want to pass,” Morgan said, “I’m still of the opinion that the two of us don’t need you.”

“We know who you are, Ben. We’ve seen your military records. We know you’ve got ... connections to the *Atlas*.” Ace paused, then rushed on. “You’ve commanded before. Now we ask you to do it again. Together, we can stop whatever the hell these bastards are up to.” He again held out his hand. “So what do you say?”

Ben knew he should say yes. This was everything he’d been trying to get someone to listen to him about and more.

And yet, there was something about the way that Ace kept fingering the blaster on the table. The way that Morgan had casually drugged him. There was a lot more of a story here that he wasn’t getting. Cops? Maybe, but something else too. Something messier. Something that smelled to Ben like trouble.

“I have to think about it.”

“Now or never, Benny baby,” Ace said.

“What are you not telling me?” Ben asked. Even drunk off his ass, he knew he was getting railroaded. Even if he desperately wanted to believe this was legit. He felt Morgan shift behind him. She wasn’t the poker player that Ace was; that, or she just didn’t like going along. Either way, it confirmed to Ben that they were keeping something else from him.

“Nothing,” Ace said. “So...you in, brother?”

Ben shrugged. If that was the way it was going to be, then so be it. “Ain’t got a brother. Or a mother. So I guess that’s a no.” He turned back to the bar and started waving for the bartender.

“Told ya,” Morgan said.

Ace sighed. “Just stick him and let’s go.”

Ben whirled around at that, smashing his glass down on the bar and breaking off a nice ragged edge that he swung at Morgan.

Or at least, he swung at where Morgan had been. Quick as a cat, she’d already slipped off the stool and kicked the leg out from under Ben’s. As he fell, he tried to swing the ragged glass handle down on her, but Ace grabbed his arm at the elbow and squeezed with such might that Ben’s hand instantly flexed open.

Before he could so much as yelp, he felt a metal pin touch the back of his neck. Morgan depressed the delivery canister, and he felt a cool sensation run down his spine.

“Sweet dreams,” Morgan said.

EIGHTEEN

BEN

A FEW HOURS LATER, Ben awoke with a massive headache. He rolled over, thinking he'd had the weirdest dream of his life. Then he realized he wasn't in his bed. He was on a hard metal floor. He looked up as a shadow crossed the floor. "You," he said to Ace. "I thought that was a dream."

"Aw, and I was hoping I was your dream," Morgan said, stepping forward to join Ace.

Ben looked around in bewilderment. "What the hell is this?"

"This is our ship," Ace said.

Ben shook his head. "This is crazy."

Ace looked far crazier now than he had in the dark bar yesterday. He was again casually patting the blaster at his side, like he was thinking about using it.

"Let me tell you two stories," Morgan said.

"Oh, good, story time," Ace said casually.

"The smartass and I have some history with the Oblivion," Morgan said. "Ace here was a Marine before he joined the DC special unit and started doing undercover work. He might be a shit pilot compared to me, but somehow, back then he must have known how to fly, because he piloted missions to the front lines on Andohar. His crew was ambushed by Oblivion cultists. He was the only survivor, pulled out of the fiery wreck barely alive."

"That's what makes me so pretty," Ace said.

"And I, well." She paused. "I was nothing special."

"Lost your husband and son in the attack on the fusion radiation plant outside Seattle," Ace said.

“Way to ruin the story,” Morgan said. Ben could tell she was straining a bit to laugh it off. Maybe she needed to laugh it off. Ben remembered the reports. He didn’t remember the Oblivion being mentioned, but it made sense. That was before it was widely reported how aggressive the cult was once again becoming.

“My husband, Matt, took our son Thomas to work that day. I saw the explosion from our house, burned out both of my retinas, blinded me. Hence these guys.” She pointed at her eyes.

“Shit,” Ben said.

“Shit,” agreed Morgan.

Ben pursed his lips. “Look, I get where you guys are coming from. I mean, look at me. I lost an arm, a leg, and a mom.”

“And maybe a dad,” offered Ace. Morgan elbowed him. “Ow, just saying.”

“I want revenge. You want revenge. I get it. But I guess my question is,” Ben said, shrugging, “what do you want from me?”

“Help us get a neural implant from the Oblivion,” Ace said. “If you still think afterward that you want to go to the UEF with it, you’ll have that much more evidence.”

Morgan shrugged. “It’s just one mission. I know how you military boys like to think about things in missions.”

“So that part is true? You two are cops, not military? You just worked with the Marines?”

“Everything we told you is true,” she said. “We just ... left a couple of things out.”

“Such as?” Ben prompted.

“Not yet,” Ace said.

“What’s the state secret, Ace?” Morgan snapped.

“I said not yet,” he said darkly.

“And I said don’t tell me what the hell to do,” she said. She stood slowly to face him. She had her hand on her pistol.

It suddenly seemed quite possible that Ben could get killed in a shootout between two people who’d kidnapped him.

The comedy of life never ended.

“Listen, assholes,” Ben said, getting to his feet between the two of them. He was unarmed, and held out his palms toward each of them. “Just take it easy.”

Ace spat on the ground, but he moved his hand away from his blaster. Morgan let her hand casually drop from the handle of her pocket pistol.

Ben breathed easier, then rubbed the bridge of his nose as he shook his head. "I can't believe I got kidnapped by a couple of trigger-happy weirdoes."

"She started it," Ace said.

"Very mature," Morgan said.

"So somebody tell me exactly why you wanted me," Ben said.

"Because you'd believe us," Ace said.

"And?" Ben asked. He knew there was more.

"And you're rich," Morgan said. "And connected."

Ben reeled like he'd been punched. It seemed so simple and obvious that he realized it was true. "You're cut off."

Morgan nodded. "All assets frozen. All contacts wiped, all—"

"Full wipe," Ace said. "We're completely screwed on this rock."

"I'm not rich—" Ben began.

"You're rich enough, and you still have access to your funds. We got jack shit."

"I thought you had off-planet contacts," Ben said to Morgan.

"Yeah," she said. "'Off' being the key word. On this planet, we got nothing."

Ben shook his head. "My connections went away when I was discharged."

Morgan shook her head. "You still have search credentials," she said, "until the end of your discharge month. I looked it up."

"You looked it up?"

"We just need you to help pay for fuel for the ship and get us access for a query. It'll just be one query. In and out. We know the Oblivion cell that was directly linked with the off-world plans. The ones involving the *Atlas*." She paused. "We just need to get a neural implant off one of the cult members there. It'll have all the data we need."

"And then we need to jump away from this rock and never come back," Ace said.

There was a pregnant pause as Ace finished speaking. Morgan nodded, but said nothing more.

Ben struggled to come to terms with what they were saying. This was all true now. It made sense. He understood why they needed him. And more

than anything, it meant that they really did know something about what the Oblivion cult was doing. About the aliens they seemed to be working with.

“They’ll know the instant we run the search,” he said at last.

Ace and Morgan exchanged a glance. Ace smiled. “Oh, we know that. It’s a smash and grab job.”

“And then off-planet?”

“What, you got something holding you here anymore?”

Ace asked it with snark, but the words were like a kick in the teeth for Ben. He was right. What was holding him here anymore?

“Okay,” he said at last. “I’m in.”

NINETEEN

LEE

“ARE you sure you want to do this, sir? I mean, we can go in ourselves.” Rollins stood outside the closed, airtight door to the engine room.

Standing across from him, but close to Rollins, was Saito. Next to him were Sousa and one of the Marines. All four of them outside that door were armed. Rollins, Sousa, and Saito had their pistols. The lone Marine carried an assault rifle.

“I gave Chevenko the bridge. I need to know what happened down here, and we need to fix it. Otherwise those dreadnoughts will turn us into space scrap,” responded Saito.

“None of us are engineers, sir,” Sousa pointed out.

“We’ll figure it out. Now open the door, Commander.”

“Sir, yes sir.” In one hand, Rollins had his pistol. In the other, he had a crowbar-like tool, meant to open sealed bulkhead doors on the *Atlas*. After holstering his pistol, he went to work on the door.

Even though he was a strong young man, Rollins had a little trouble getting the doors to engineering open. It took some grunting, burning muscles, and hurting hands, but eventually he managed to pry them apart.

The lone UEF Marine insisted on going in first. It was his job to protect Saito. He’d be damned if that wasn’t what he was going to do.

Emergency lighting lit the engine room red. Immediately upon opening the door, the stench of fire, blood, and death hit the group of four. Sousa started to cough.

“Let’s start with engines one thorough four. I want any survivors accounted for before they get out of here. Understood?” Saito wanted to make sure that anyone in engineering that still lived didn’t run off. In his

gut, he knew the engines had been sabotaged before the AIC attacks had begun, and he needed to know who that saboteur was and question them. His nightmare scenario was that there were more on his ship.

“Understood,” said the Marine. He turned left, towards the narrow corridor that led to engines one, two, three, four, and five.

The further the group went down the corridor to the engine room, the hotter it got. Smoke obscured their vision. None of them knew exactly where the fire was coming from.

Millions of thoughts ran through Saito’s mind. All of them centered around what his next course of action was.

“What the hell happened here?” asked Sousa.

The corridors of engineering were claustrophobic. Countless wires and pipes lined the walls. Parts of the structure stuck out, threatening to knock into shins and heads, making paying attention important.

“There was an explosion down here, from the inside,” said Rollins.

Saito tried to keep things calm. “We don’t know that.”

“We do know...may I speak frankly, sir?” asked Rollins.

Saito ducked, just barely banging into a circuit box. “Please do.”

Rollins said what most of them were thinking. “We know that the damage we took from the attack wasn’t enough to cripple this ship.”

“What do you mean?” asked the Marine as he stepped over a dead engineer. He didn’t quite clear the splayed-out arm, and his ankle twisted. He nearly fell over, and there was a sick squishing sound as he found his footing by smashing down the arm.

“Will you be careful, Bucky?” Sousa snapped, immediately giving Saito a name to go with the rank.

“Sorry,” Bucky said.

Sousa rolled his eyes. “Go on, Rollins.”

“Like I was saying, even without shielding, the armor around the engineering section is thicker than the rest of the ship’s armor for obvious reasons. Now, the shockwave from the stage-four missile explosion was enough to knock out the remaining engines, yes, but we lost several before that. That’s why we weren’t able to outrun those bastards,” explained Rollins.

“It had to be sabotage,” added Sousa.

“So you’re saying it was blown up from the inside?” asked Bucky, who didn’t seem to be blessed with the quickest mind.

“Looks that way,” Saito said. “But this is all still speculation at this point.”

The group passed a couple more dead engineers. It looked as if they’d died in the explosions, burned to a crisp. Gruesome as it was, Saito’s group did their best to pay them no mind and keep moving.

“Does that mean we...is there a traitor on board?” Bucky asked.

“Absolutely,” answered Sousa, muffled by his free hand over his mouth to ward off the terrible odor of the engineering level.

The reality of the *Atlas*’ situation was grim. For all the advanced technology and weaponry aboard the dreadnought, it was helpless. With no engines or shielding, all they could do was float aimlessly and hope that the AIC dreadnoughts didn’t finish them off.

Saito knew that the *Atlas*’ crew was running out of time. Sooner or later the remains of the AIC fleet would find them, board them, and finish off the job. Having lost the vast majority of the on-board Marines in the initial attack in the docking bay, trying to fight them off inside the ship was a losing proposition. Their only hope was to restore power to the engines and run.

Suddenly, Saito felt someone grab his ankle.

TWENTY

LEE

FIGHTING off his natural instinct to jerk away, Saito managed to simply stop and look down. All he saw was a dirty hand and forearm jutting out from under some piping and wiring against one wall.

“Sir! Step back, sir!” snapped Bucky. His assault rifle was trained on the arm grabbing the captain’s ankle. Apparently the talk of traitors in their midst had spooked him.

“Are you really pointing a weapon at a survivor?” He stared daggers at the Marine.

“Uh, no sir?” Bucky seemed confused, but lowered his rifle.

Saito reached down and took the charred hand in his. Slowly, a member of the engineering crew inched their way out from their hiding spot. Her brown uniform was in almost as bad a shape as the woman herself.

The woman’s face and uniform were covered in blood and soot. It wasn’t clear if it was her blood or someone else’s. Her eyes were wide and rapidly searched around, as if she was looking for something. She was clearly in shock.

“What’s your name?” Saito said.

The woman didn’t answer. The *pop* of a broken wire made her jump, and then cower.

“Do you know who I am?” Saito tried again.

“You don’t understand,” answered the woman.

“What don’t we understand?” asked Rollins.

The woman started crying. At first it was just a little bit, but within seconds she fully broke down and started sobbing. Through her tears and

sniffles, she mumbled what sounded like nonsense. But Saito didn't think it was nonsense.

"Slow down," urged Saito, trying to start over again. "What happened here? What's your name?"

"They changed. Oh God, they changed. And the sound... I can still hear it." The woman grabbed onto Saito's sleeve. With a crazed look in her eye she yelled, "The sound!"

"How did they change?" Saito asked, trying to keep his voice low and comforting.

"They were like you and me, and then I saw it, something terrible. They killed them. They killed them all!"

"She's crazy," Sousa said.

"No, she's scared," Saito answered.

"With all due respect, sir, I agree with Lieutenant Sousa. Please, get away from her, something isn't right," Rollins said. "We'll call in medics."

"She's traumatized," Saito said. "We're not leaving her here until medics can get here. She's coming with us."

The woman scurried back, hitting the wire- and pipe-covered wall. Then she slid down to her rear on the grated floor. She manically shook her head and kept muttering to herself. "No, no, no! I'm not...we need to leave. It's still here!"

As if on cue, the group heard a loud screeching noise echo throughout the engineering deck. It didn't sound mechanical. It sounded as if it came from an animal of some sort.

"What the hell was that?" Sousa said.

"Are we sure that all power to the engines is shut down?" asked Rollins.

"We need to leave! Or it'll kill us too." The woman's hysterics didn't stop, but once Bucky had her standing up, she kept following along with them, refusing to be left alone.

Ahead of the group was a fork in the corridors. One way was to the first engine room, which housed engines one through five. The other engine room housed the remainder.

Bucky led the group to the first engine room. Neither he nor the rest of the group was ready for what awaited them there.

Atlas' engines weren't new innovations; just improvements on similar engines found on the Navy's dreadnoughts. Like those found on older ships, they were very large, about the height of a two-story building and the width

of a ranch home each. Engines one, two, and three looked as if they'd been hit by a rocket-propelled grenade. Large gaping holes with smoke bellowing out of them—all in the same place, smack dab in the middle—made it clear that they were manually blown up. Accidents tended not to create perfect patterns.

But it wasn't the state of the engines that shocked Saito. It was the state of the engineering crew.

They were wiped out. They weren't just killed, but it looked as if something had torn them apart. Pieces, human body pieces, were everywhere. Blood splattered every surface.

"Jesus Christ! What in the hell happened here?" Rollins asked.

Sousa vomited on the grated floor. Unfortunately, when he opened his eyes, he was staring down at the pooled blood and guts below from the savaged crew. "Oh God," he said before he threw up again.

Saito knelt down and picked up a pair of charred dog tags. He couldn't even read the name.

Rollins made his way through the carnage and gore to the engines. "I've seen this before, sir, in my time with the army," he said, pointing at the hole in the nearest engine assembly. "These were from shape charges. We used them to breach doors and bulkheads."

No one needed to explain what that meant. Even Bucky figured that one out. Saito felt anger, sadness, and, most acutely, profound failure. He examined the deformed bodies of his dead crew all around him. The one nearest his feet had extensive burns. "Some of these were from the explosions. You can tell by their burns and injuries." He pointed to one of the numerous bodies near him. "See here, this trauma, it's consistent with the percussive damage of a grenade or plastic explosives."

"What about the rest of them?" asked Sousa as he wiped the vomit from his lips. "Looks like, I dunno..."

It's frenzied, wild, like an animal attack or something.

Saito took a closer look at some of the other dead. Nothing was clean. There weren't clean cuts or slashes. Everything looked haphazard, not clinical.

"I'm not sure who or what did this, but it doesn't look or feel human," stated Saito as he stood back up.

"Then what—?" Sousa was cut off by another loud screech.

Everyone was quiet for several seconds.

Sousa grabbed the woman from engineering. “No more bullshit, what is that?”

“This is no time to panic, Captain,” said Saito. Even if the woman wanted to make more sense, it was clear she was in too much shock to do so.

“No time to panic, sir? There’s something in here with us. And I’ll bet that that something is what tore these poor people to pieces.” Sousa was close to breaking.

“We need to check the other engines,” Saito said, hoping a clear mission parameter would cool Sousa down. “Let’s go to the second engine room.”

Saito had just turned when something caught his eye.

One of the corpses got up to one knee off the grated floor. His movement was unnatural, like a child standing up on two legs for the first time. As he tried to steady himself, he made an odd static noise, similar to a television or when you try to plug in broken headphones.

“Another survivor,” Rollins said. “Maybe we can ask—”

“Get away! Get away from it! Run!” yelled the terrified woman as she tried to follow her own advice.

“Commander, maybe you shouldn’t,” said Bucky.

“Yeah, man, something is definitely wrong here,” pointed out Sousa as he and the others watched the survivor twitch violently and move his limbs around in an amazed way, as if he had never used them before.

“He’s probably just in shock.” Rollins held out his left hand in an attempt to soothe and help the survivor. “It’s okay. We’re here to help. We can get you outta here to the med bay.”

The risen man opened his eyes, revealing shining metal orbs. Instead of just his mouth opening, the man’s neck split open and let out a loud screech, similar to the ones the group had heard before. Without any warning, what looked to be a blade made of bone and metal jutted out of one of his arms and cleaved off Rollins’ outstretched hand.

TWENTY-ONE

LEE

ROLLINS SCREAMED AND SPUN AWAY, holding the stump of his arm. It had been cleanly severed just above the wrist.

“Holy...!” yelled Bucky seconds before firing on the risen corpse. His bullets hit their mark, but simply passed through the risen corpse’s skin, flesh, and bone. It didn’t appear fazed at all. Instead, it screeched again and charged him.

“Open fire!” ordered Saito. He and Sousa both emptied their clips into the risen corpse. Neither of their bullets had any effect.

The risen corpse stabbed Bucky in the belly with the same blade used to sever Rollins’ hand. More blades expanded out of that one, shooting out of the now dead Marine’s shoulders, collar, back, neck, and stomach. Before falling to the ground, he looked like a steel porcupine.

“Everyone fall back!” ordered Saito as he reloaded. There was no time to think about or analyze what had just happened. His only priority at that point was to get out of there with the remains of the group.

Sousa yanked Rollins close to him and spun to leave. “Move!” he screamed, trying to cajole Rollins to move faster. He was still in shock. Saito grabbed the woman and kept firing on the creature as they ran backwards. It followed after, but not quickly.

“What the hell was that?” yelled Sousa as they ran back towards the door to engineering.

“No idea,” answered Saito, wondering if he was in shock too for bothering to answer him.

“It’s them! I tried to tell you!” yelled the terrified woman.

Saito stopped and took Rollins from Sousa by the good arm. The other ended at a stump just above the wrist, which bled profusely. The captain knew that if it went untreated, his second-in-command would bleed out.

In his own shock, Sousa almost didn't notice. "Sir! Why are you stopping?" he asked, after he'd run a good dozen feet before realizing that Saito and Rollins had stopped in the middle of the engineering corridor. The terrified woman didn't slow.

"I need to stop the bleeding. Go, Lieutenant! Get help!" Saito pointed in the direction of main engineering, where the woman had run to. Sousa nodded and turned.

Saito searched his uniform's pockets for the med kit, then pulled out an insta-patch. Shaped like a regular gauze pad, the patch instantly suctioned onto Rollins's wound when Saito applied pressure to it. A band inside tightened about an inch down from the edge of the bloody stump, staunching the flow of blood.

"You're okay, Rollins," Saito said, trying to will the words to be true. Rollins, pale and barely conscious, nodded. Saito braced Rollins's weight; he was big, but he wasn't getting any younger. He grunted with the effort. Rollins was no lightweight.

As they reached the entrance to the engineering level, Sousa was waiting. That wasn't a surprise, but Chief Engineer Liu next to him was. And what she was doing surprised Saito even more.

One of Liu's arms was unnaturally outstretched, so long that her skin broke open, and a bone and metal arm kept stretching out from it. Her arm ended at a point that was pinning something against the wall.

Saito sucked in his breath as he realized it was the lifeless body of the terrified woman. Her legs dangled several feet off the grated floor.

"Saito?" asked Molly as the arm retracted and the woman's dead body fell.

"Liu?" Saito didn't know what to do with what he was seeing.

"What's wrong?" Molly asked. It was as if her mind wasn't aware of what her arm had just done.

The arm shifted. There was a sick wet crunching and popping noise as her bones reformed back to a human shape; muscle spun around and clung to it. Then new skin crawled over it to create something that was indistinguishable from human.

"Nothing." Saito inched his way to the exit. "Nothing at all, Chief."

Sousa had beaten him to it, and was standing on the other side of the open doorway, silently urging him to hurry up.

“I’m not sure what went wrong with the engines, but I assure you sir, we’re working o-o-o-o-on a fi-fi-fi-fi-fix.” Molly struggled to get the words out. She tried to smile, but came off much more creepy than friendly.

Stay calm. Act like nothing is wrong. Nothing is wrong at all. Saito helped Rollins through the doorway before doing so himself. “Just keep me informed, Chief. I trust that you’ll get it done.”

Molly saluted Saito through the porthole of the now-closed door to the engineering level. “Sir, yes sir. Right away, sir.”

“*Atlas*, put a lock on the door to the engineering level. Restrict access to myself only, using my credentials,” Saito ordered the *Atlas*’ operating system.

“What. The. Hell?” Sousa choked out.

“That was a zombie,” Rollins said groggily.

“He’s in shock,” Saito said.

“I must be too,” Sousa said, “because that’s what they looked like to me.”

“Did you see what was happening with Liu?”

“Yes. I mean, no. I mean, yes, but I don’t understand what’s going on,” Sousa hissed in confusion. “If they aren’t zombies, then what the hell was that?”

“Whatever they were, they’re dangerous and seem to mean us harm. So we need to figure out how to harm them first.” Dozens of possibilities ran through Saito’s mind, but none of them really made sense. Could the AIC have new biological weapons? The rebels already did a lot of work with gene editing and biohacking, but would they go so far as to create creatures like what they’d just encountered?

There wasn’t time for Saito, Rollins, or Sousa to contemplate or debate what they’d just encountered in engineering. The *Atlas* shook hard for a few seconds; then there was a loud banging noise. Saito knew exactly what that sound was. They were in the process of being boarded.

“Lieutenant, take the commander to the med bay,” ordered Saito. “I’ve got to get to the bridge.”

TWENTY-TWO

ADA

“MARINES! REGROUP ON ME!” yelled Sgt. Amir Ali. He was the highest-ranking Marine left in the *Atlas*’ docking bay.

Ada Ericsson joined the group of seven Marines that had survived the initial attack and the torpedo to the docking bay. Still in shock, her body ran completely on autopilot.

“Jesus, is this it?” asked Ali. “Okay, we’ll make do. Orders are to join the rest of the crew near the mess hall, so arm yourselves and regroup on me in exactly two minutes. Understood?”

“Yes, Sergeant!” yelled the surviving Marines in unison. All but Ada, who simply stared forward blindly, wondering how she got there and how she’d survived.

The Marines scattered, seemingly ignoring the fact that hundreds of their fellow crewmembers had just died via getting sucked out into space. Perhaps it was the fact their corpses were out of sight that made it easier, but Ada still saw the streaks of blood on the floor that ended abruptly at the emergency door that resealed the room.

She looked up to find the sergeant barking in her face. “Arm yourself, Private! This fight isn’t over.”

Ada snapped herself out of it and began searching the docking bay. There wasn’t much left that wasn’t bolted down, so she decided to go back to the Marine HQ and see if she could grab a rifle or pistol from there.

All the windows in the HQ were blown out. The bodies of those who died in the initial attack after the fold jump were stuck in or by the blown-out windows, stacked on top of each other.

Ada covered her mouth and nose and entered the Marine HQ. It took everything she had not to freak out from not only the smell of death, but from seeing so many corpses. Before this day, she'd never ever seen one.

You're not here, you're back home. You're back at your family's cabin. You're back with your boyfriend. You're anywhere but here, searching through piles of dead bodies for a rifle or a pistol that you'll hopefully never have to use.

Ada searched the dead for weapons. Under one poor soul she found a pistol and a couple of clips of ammunition. She figured that was enough; she didn't need a rifle. They were in space, after all, not dropping down on an AIC planet. Why would she need—

Ada heard the unmistakable crack of gunshots outside in the docking bay. After a volley of fire, there was some yelling, screaming, more shots; then silence.

Scared and cautious, Ada peeked through the corpses piled up against the Marine HQ's blown-out windows. A group of ten or so AIC soldiers walked around the docking bay, checking for and killing any survivors. She knew they were AIC by their black uniforms, and the helmets that fully encased their heads.

They boarded us? Already? You need to hide. But the only place to... damn it, just do it.

Ada didn't like it, but she knew there was only one hiding place. It would smell and be gross, but both were better than taking a super-heated bullet to the head.

Ada lay down on the pile of dead Marines in the HQ. Then she pulled a couple on top of her in the hope that she'd just blend in. All that was left to do was wait: wait and hold her breath.

The AIC soldiers methodically made their way around the docking bay. Finally one of them made their way over to the Marine HQ. They shone the light on the edge of their rifle through the windows.

Ada's heart beat a mile a minute as the AIC soldier shone his light right over her. Unable to fully hold her breath, she took extremely slow shallow ones, keeping her undetectable.

Or so she thought.

The AIC soldier spoke into his radio, asking for one of his colleagues to come over. His voice sounded almost like electrical static. It was the strangest thing Ada had ever heard.

What language is that? Some outer edge dialect?

Ada didn't have much time to contemplate the language the AIC soldier was using, because the initial soldier was joined by another, and together they decided to examine the HQ further. She stopped breathing and closed her eyes.

Never a religious woman, Ada silently prayed to whichever god would listen to deliver her safe and sound from her current predicament. The AIC soldiers got close. Her heart almost jumped out of her chest when one of them poked a dead Marine on top of her with his rifle.

Ada couldn't help it; her eyes opened wide in sheer terror. That's when she noticed that, across the room, also buried under dead bodies, a shape was moving. It looked like a soldier just waking up. He must've been knocked unconscious by the initial attack.

As he stirred, one of the bodies lying next to him flopped over, falling loudly to the ground.

One of the AIC soldiers, who had been walking away, stopped and turned.

TWENTY-THREE

ADA

ADA KNEW she had one chance, or she was dead. She jerked her head around quickly enough that the man would see her, but moments before the soldier was back in the room.

The man turned to look at her, confusion and growing terror on his face as what was all around him was becoming clear. Ada held his gaze with her own.

Okay, good. Now look at me, keep looking at me.

Carefully, she shook her head back and forth, not moving the body on top of her. She also used one hand, stuck it out straight and flat, motioned downwards in an attempt to tell him to stay down.

The man froze.

A moment later, the AIC soldier appeared right in the line of vision between the two of them. He leaned down and poked the body that had fallen. Satisfied, he stood, turned, and ambled out to join the others.

The AIC soldiers moved on from the Marine HQ, allowing Ada to let out a huge sigh of relief. With the coast almost clear, she just waited until she heard them leave the docking bay.

Ada scrambled out from under and on top of the pile of dead Marines. She gasped, desperate to refill her lungs, which she'd deprived of the proper amount of air for the last five to ten minutes.

The other Marine did the same. He crawled out from under his own dead-comrade pile-up and then got up and sat in one of the chairs.

“What in the—” The Marine was getting ready to ask what was going on when Ada shushed him.

Ada climbed out of the Marine HQ just enough to look out into the docking bay. There wasn't an AIC soldier in sight. It was finally safe, at least in that small portion of the *Atlas*.

"Your name?" asked Ada as she returned to the surviving Marine.

"Angel," he said. "Private Angel Baez. Who are you? Why are all these people dead? What the hell is happening here?" Having just woken up, Baez had no idea what was going on. Like Ada, he'd been knocked unconscious by the initial attack after the fold jump.

"My name is Private Ada Ericsson, and we're under attack."

"Under attack? By who?"

"The AIC."

Baez took a second to process the news. He ran his hand across the top of his standard-issue Marine crew cut. "Damn...how bad is it?"

Ada raised one eyebrow and waved her arms around the room. "What do you think?"

"And that was them, out there?"

"Who else would they be?"

"Damn. Okay, so, we gotta get outta here, right? Join the fight or whatever."

We need to run, hide, and figure out a way off this ship. Otherwise we aren't ever getting home. She swallowed that down. "We do. First we have to get out of the docking bay. Come on."

"Right on, boss lady. I'm gonna follow you."

Ada climbed out of the Marine HQ and into the docking bay proper, with Baez right behind her. She wanted to ignore the dead Marines laid out on the floor, but they needed their weapons. She tried her best not to disturb the bodies.

Armed with rifles and pistols, they reached the bulkhead door that served as the main entrance to the docking bay. Ada glanced at Angel, then held her breath as she pressed the button on the panel next to it.

As soon as the doors opened, Ada heard the sounds of fighting echoing through the halls and corridors of the *Atlas*. This was no time or place for fear, although Ada felt it bubbling up inside her. She tried to keep it off her face as she glanced at Baez. Both of them had to be ready to fight for their very lives.

If Baez looked closely, he'd notice the rifle in her hands trembling slightly. He'd notice the sweat accumulating on her forehead. He'd hear her

labored, nervous breathing. But she hid it well as the two of them used their training to slowly make their way down the hall, checking their corners and keeping each other covered.

This is what all that training was for, I guess.

Ada was surprised at how disciplined she suddenly became as she and Baez slowly traversed the halls of the *Atlas*, looking for any other members of the crew to join. As frightened as she'd been of fighting before the ship launched from Annapolis, she was purposefully, by choice, heading straight for the sounds of it.

Ada motioned with her hand for Baez to stop. The two of them hugged a wall around the corner from the corridor that led to the *Atlas*' mess hall. She looked around the corner and saw a full-blown skirmish just outside the cafeteria entrance.

Those are our men. We finally found someone.

Ada motioned for Baez to come with her so they could join the fight alongside other UEF soldiers.

The soldiers spun around, raising their weapons as they did so.

"Whoa!" Baez said, stopping in his tracks and putting his arms up.

"We're with you," Ada added, doing the same. Then she recognized one of the men holding a pistol. She could hardly call herself a crewmember if she didn't. "Captain Saito?" she asked incredulously.

"We don't know if you're with us or not," Saito said. He sounded rattled; nothing like the strong voice she'd heard earlier over the ship comms.

"Sir?" Ada asked, not sure what to say. *Why wouldn't I be with you?*

Then the group spun around again, all but Saito, as several more soldiers came up behind them. They began firing on them. Ada assumed they were AIC soldiers, coming out of the section of the mess hall's hull that they'd cut open for boarding.

"What do you...of course we're on your side," she said again.

"So you say. Prove it. Tell me something only a person, a human being would know," demanded Saito. His stare was icy and serious. His finger was on the trigger of his pistol.

Something only a human being would know? What a weird question. Shouldn't our priority be fighting those AIC bastards?

"Sir, have you lost your mind? Of course we're people! What the hell else would we be?" Baez' hands kept shifting position on his rifle. He was

getting ready to raise it again.

Saito didn't waver. "You have five seconds, soldier, before I put you down."

Baez was beside himself. "Great! Our captain has lost his mind!"

"The last meal I ate before I was deployed was with my parents in Annapolis!" Ada spouted out the first thing that came to her mind. "We're from Sweden and we never ate Southern barbecue. So we decided that would be our last meal before I left." Ada shook her head. "I had pulled pork on a bun. Coleslaw, collard greens, cornbread. The whole thing."

Ada stopped to catch her breath, feeling incredibly stupid. It was the only thing she could think of to say.

"Where?" asked Saito. "Where did you get this barbecue?"

This is a ridiculous conversation. "Ralph's on one hundred and thirty-fourth, on level twenty-two."

Saito lowered his pistol. "They do make one hell of a pulled pork sandwich." He spun around and started firing along with the others.

Baez looked at Ada and shook his head incredulously. Ada was as stupefied as he was, but she just shrugged and joined the line of crewmembers firing on the approaching AIC soldiers. Baez reluctantly did the same, but he stayed on the opposite side of the group from Saito. Ada did, too.

Ada immediately noticed how terrible the AIC soldiers' aim was. They couldn't hit a thing. It was as if they'd never fired a gun before. Even she'd done better the first time she went to the range in boot camp.

For the first time in her life, Ada fired a weapon at another person with the intent of killing them. When she let loose that first shot, she felt a little queasy, but that was replaced with shock when the AIC soldier she hit didn't go down. He just kept coming as if nothing happened.

"We haven't figured out how to kill them," Saito said, as if this was a perfectly normal thing to say in the middle of a firefight. "We can only slow them down. Aim for the legs."

Baez glanced at Ada between shots. "Did he just say—"

Ada watched as another of her shots hit center mass and didn't slow down the soldier coming at her. "He sure did."

TWENTY-FOUR

LEE

SAITO STEPPED AWAY from the firing line for a second. “Call Major Chevenko.”

A video screen popped up in his HUD. It was Chevenko. “Sir?”

“What’s the status?” asked Saito. “Can we do it?”

“According to our on-board scientists and all of our instruments, we have enough for one more fold jump.”

Saito grunted. “Make the preparations. We’ll be back to the bridge in a few minutes.”

“Sir,” Chevenko said. “You should know ... we’ll be jumping blind. There’s no way of knowing for sure where we’ll end up.”

“Anywhere other than here will do. Start the sequence, we’re getting out of here. End call.” Saito turned to his new group, which now included Ada and Baez. “Everyone get back behind the blast walls,” he said, pointing at the doorway out of the mess hall.

Rollins and Sousa didn’t need more instruction than that. Ada seemed to pick up on it quickly enough when she saw the grenades in his hand. She grabbed Baez and they started moving, too.

Saito was halfway to the blast doors when he flicked off the pins and threw them into the growing group of AIC.

He burst into the hallway, making it out of danger just as the grenades exploded and the emergency airtight walls fell, cutting the mess hall off from the rest of the ship.

I’m so sorry.

Saito took a moment to look down at the men he’d lost in the firefight outside the mess hall.

Though he wasn't able to save them, he promised them: *Your sacrifices, they won't be in vain. I promise you. We will survive and tell your families of your honorable sacrifice. You will be remembered.*

And with that, Saito left with the survivors.

The enemy had boarded the *Atlas* in several locations across the ship. Saito was able to lead a party to close off the one through the mess hall, but there were still roving groups of hostiles, and no one except those that ran into them knew where they were.

"Marines," Saito said. Ada and Baez glanced back to him as the small group carefully made their way towards the shuttle that led to the bridge.

"Yes, sir?" answered Ada as she kept her eyes forward in the same direction that she aimed her weapon.

"Are you all that's left? Is there anyone else?"

Ada glanced at Baez, and he shook his head.

"As far as we know, sir," said Baez. "Most of the Marines onboard were taken out in the initial attack on the docking bay."

Ada swallowed hard, and Saito could tell she'd seen something that rattled her. She was green, he thought. Then again, she'd gotten this far, and it didn't seem anyone else had.

"No sir," she said. "The attack...it's just us."

Saito nodded. "We need to hurry; the fold jump engines are about to spin up. We need to be on the bridge before they do."

He gave Ada a squeeze on the shoulder. He nodded at Baez, who nodded back. Then he took his position in front. He glanced at Rollins, whose complexion was returning. With the healing pack on his right wrist, Rollins was already looking better, and he was just tough as nails.

You have to ignore it. Some are going to die, have died. But if you're going to save the majority, the few are going to have to fend for themselves.

Saito did his best to ignore the sounds of fighting down hallways and corridors as they ran in a tight formation. He had to get to the bridge, and nothing could be allowed to derail him from that plan. If they didn't get the ship as far away from those remaining dreadnoughts as possible, the enemies onboard wouldn't matter, because the *Atlas* would be blown to bits.

The group finally reached the internal shuttle to the *Atlas'* command bridge. He held his breath as he pressed the button summoning said shuttle. There was no telling if it was still operational or not, and the other way to

the bridge took a lot longer and would involve traversing more dangerous corridors, and possibly having to fight their way out.

Saito breathed a sigh of relief as there was a beep, and the doors to the shuttle opened.

Thank God. Something goes in our favor.

“Captain, please, you first,” suggested Ada.

“No. I’m making sure everyone gets to the bridge safely before—”

“Sir, we insist. We’re expendable. You’re not,” chimed in Rollins.

“Screw that, I’m not expendable,” said Baez. He got onto the shuttle.

“No one is expendable,” Saito said. *Except those poor men and women I’m leaving behind to fight off the enemy on board the ship.* “I go last. This is not negotiable. Get on the shuttle! That’s an order!”

Ada stayed behind with Saito, along with two other members of the crew. They hunkered down and watched the corridor in front of them as half the group took the shuttle to the bridge.

Here they come.

Saito heard a high-pitched screeching noise.

“What is that?” asked Ada. She loosened, then re-tightened her grip on her gun.

“Hold steady,” ordered Saito.

“That doesn’t sound like rebels,” Ada said.

“Just hold steady and be ready to fight.”

A single AIC soldier appeared from around the corner at the end of the corridor. Saito waited to give the command to fire until the AIC soldier raised his rifle and began firing erratically.

Anger replaced adrenaline as Saito emptied a whole clip at the enemy. Most of his bullets hit their mark, but none of them stopped the AIC soldier, much as they hadn’t for the others.

“Why won’t they go down!?” yelled Ada over the sound of gunfire.

“Just keep firing!” ordered Saito.

Whether it was a ricochet or just an ill-aimed shot, a bullet hit one of the coolant pipes that ran across the ceiling of the corridor. It punctured it, resulting in the pipe spitting out super-chilled gas. The attacking AIC soldier tried to walk through it, with no success.

That’s...interesting.

“Hold your fire!” ordered Saito. He looked at the enemy, which was frozen in place under the spray of coolant. Yes, the chemical was cold, but

not cold enough to freeze a man in place in a matter of seconds.

There was a beep behind Saito and Ada. It was the shuttle to the bridge returning. And it came just in time, because they heard more screeches coming their way.

This is...

Saito, finally with a chance to breathe, looked outside the shuttle window out at space. Pieces of AIC ships were floating everywhere. They were accompanied by the bodies of Marines and pilots who'd been sucked out of the *Atlas*' docking bay. Their frozen corpses, like popsicles made of flesh and bone, were haunting in the silent vacuum.

"This is terrible. How did this happen, sir?" asked Ada, who leaned her sweaty forehead against the glass. Her heart still raced as she tried to come down from all the adrenaline.

"I don't know." Saito lowered his head. For the first time in a while, he lowered his guard and sat down on the floor of the shuttle. "What's your name, Marine?"

"Ada. Ada Ericsson, sir." She pushed herself up and away from the window.

"Stop with that 'sir' shit. At least until we get to the bridge."

"Sir, yes...of course, Captain."

"Lee. My name is Lee, Ada. And I'm sorry."

"For what? There's no way you could've known that this was going to happen," said Ada. In a way, helping Saito helped her deal with the trauma she'd just gone through. It was a Band-Aid on a gaping wound, but it was better than nothing.

"I had a bad feeling before we even started this mission. I felt deep inside that something was wrong, that it was too good to be true. 'A mission of peace to end a twenty-year war'. Of course it wouldn't be that easy."

"My Pappa, he always told me that anything worth doing is hard. This was worth doing, s—Lee."

Saito pointed out the window. "That's the price. All those lives and probably a lot more. Is that worth it?"

Ada didn't have an answer.

Another beep signaled that they'd reached the bridge. Saito stood. "We can't let this all be for nothing."

TWENTY-FIVE

WASH

“GOOD MORNING, ANNA,” Jaime Washburn, mayor of Sanctuary Station 33, said to the holographic image that he awoke to. It wasn’t actually Anna Slavich—a Romanian supermodel back on Earth—but Washburn wasn’t one to stand on principle when it came to his bootlegged companions.

“Good morning, sexy,” Anna answered. “How did you, you, you, sleep?” Like everything on Sanc-33, the station’s link to Washburn’s HUD was a little glitchy.

“Nightmares, night sweats, and the overwhelming urge to throw up.” Washburn sat up in bed. “The usual.”

“Do you need your medication, baby?” A drawer opened in the nightstand by Washburn’s bed. It had anti-nausea medication, painkillers, and Valium in it.

“Nah, I think I’m—” Washburn shot up out of bed, his socks almost slipping on the floor of his quarters, as he ran over to the bathroom. The sparse contents of his stomach were emptied into the steel toilet bowl, alongside a good amount of bile.

“Awww, is my baby okay?” asked Anna.

Washburn sat on his bathroom floor. “Your baby is dying.”

“Cheer up, baby! Let’s go get some coffee!”

“Yeah.” Washburn pushed himself up off the floor. “Yeah, yeah, yeah.”

After getting dressed and brushing his teeth to get the taste of vomit out his mouth, Washburn left his quarters, on his way to Carmine’s Coffee to get his caffeine fix.

Set up to be like a home away from home instead of a cold, metallic space station, Sanc-33 did all it could to look more like a city. The hallways had screens set up to masquerade as windows showing cityscapes. Others looked out on wild, untamed planet landscapes. Shops and markets lined the halls, selling anything any residents would need. There were churches, mosques, temples, and even a place for those in the cult of the Oblivion to worship.

All sanctuary stations were exactly that: sanctuaries. Free from the politics of war, any man or woman could find safety there. Fighting of any kind was restricted, enforced by police mech robots that no one in their right mind wanted to trifle with. That made Washburn's job fairly easy.

That was, until this morning.

Washburn's HUD started ringing in his head. He had an incoming video chat message. "Hey, babe, you got an incoming call from the sheriff," said Anna.

Sheriff Wei was probably the only man whose job was nearly as easy as his own.

"I ain't got enough time left in this world to waste on talking to that worrywart."

"But he's called a couple of times." Holographic Anna mimicked intertwining her arm in Washburn's.

Fine. Fine. Fine. Let's hear what he's freaking out about today. "Yeah? What can I help you with, Wei?" asked Washburn as he walked up to Carmine's.

A diminutive Southern Chinese man appeared in the video chat window in Washburn's HUD. He looked frazzled. Behind him, a growing scuffle was clearly visible and audible.

"We got a problem here, Mr. Mayor." Wei looked behind himself, then back forward.

"Oh no! A problem? That can't be good, baby," Anna chimed in over his other channel. Washburn cut it off with a wink of one eye.

"Come on, Sheriff, I haven't even had my morning coffee yet." He waved the HUD dark for a moment as he ordered. "Black, strong, and a little bit of sugar. And I mean a little bit, none of that artificial crap, either. I know y'all got the good stuff back there." Washburn's accent was almost extinct, and all but nonexistent off-planet. But his father had had it, and his father before him, and so it was passed down.

He flipped Wei back up, and it was like he'd never stopped talking. "... there's trouble at the Oblivion, I don't know what they call this place. Hey, Daniels! What do they call this place? A temple? A church? What?"

"Hell if I know," responded a voice off the video chat: Daniels.

"Anyway, between the cultists, they're causing all sorts of trouble down here, Wash. Every one of them seems to have lost their damn minds."

"About what?" asked Washburn as he took his coffee. It was hot as hell, and he managed to spill some. He cursed under his breath.

"What's that?" Wei asked, because of course that was the one moment he stopped to take a breath.

"I said what do they want?" Washburn walked away from Carmine's, down the halls of the commerce floor. It was a large circle that went almost all the way around the station.

"They don't want anything. They just keep on shouting that something's coming. Hold on just one second." Wei looked around to see if he could get somewhere a little quieter, with less commotion.

"Everyone wants something, Wei." Wash passed one of his friends, Pavel, who worked at a diner on the commerce floor. "Mornin', Pavel! How's Rebecca and the little monsters?"

"Oh, you know," Pavel said as he took out his keys to open up for the day. "The wife's mad and the kids want to leave to go planetside. So...the usual."

Washburn smiled and raised his coffee. "I'd like to tell you it gets easier, but..."

Pavel waved him on.

"Wash?" Wei said. "I'm telling you, they haven't asked for anything, except maybe for everyone on board to give themselves to the Abyss. Just their usual nonsense, but a lot more, I dunno, passionate about it. It's got folks spooked over here."

"Did you deploy the damn robots yet?" Washburn wasn't too concerned. The cultists, they were probably the worst behaved on the station. "Once they see those big metal monsters, they back down."

"We did! And they didn't!"

"All right, all right, hold your horses, Sheriff. I'll be there in a li'l bit," Washburn said. "End call."

That released Anna's lock, and she popped into view. "Oooo, it looks like a busy day today, Mr. Mayor," she said in her most playful sexy voice.

“Not now, baby. Turn off, Anna,” Washburn said.

“Just pause—” She pouted, but disappeared.

Wei met Washburn at the elevators. If he’d looked frazzled before in their video chat, Wei looked completely panicked in person. Not to mention, there was a new wrinkle. Even though it involved his clothes, it wasn’t due to the lack of ironing.

There was blood spattered on them.

TWENTY-SIX

WASH

“WHAT THE HELL HAPPENED, Wei? Whose blood is that?”

“There was a, an incident, sir. The police robots, they...one of the cultists ran towards me and they thought he was trying to attack the sheriff.” Wei stuttered. “I mean, me. I didn’t program the damn things—”

Washburn grabbed Wei and spun him around, and headed down the hall as fast as he could, trying to maintain his smile as he nodded to merchants. He spoke out of the corner of his mouth. “Did it kill...is it a him or a her?”

“Hard to tell with those cultist types,” Wei said.

“Whatever they are—”

“I’m pretty sure they’re dead. It’s right over here.”

The closer they got, the more details of the police robots Washburn could see. They were each about eight feet tall. Their shape resembled a frog standing up straight on two legs, rather than a human form. Their arms were equipped with both lethal and non-lethal ordnance. Four of them were on scene.

Washburn could hear yelling, screaming, and arguing as they approached. A crowd of residents began to form, became onlookers trying to see what was going on. Every step he took made him a little angrier—and more concerned.

Washburn could hear the little voice in his head: the one that wanted him to leave it be, delegate it, and hope it blew over. It was just laziness pushing him to take the easy way out. He’d listened to that voice more than he liked to admit, but since his uncle had died in office and he’d backed his way into the job of sanctuary mayor, he was trying to turn over a new leaf.

Trying was the key point.

“Rejoice! Our brother has joined with the Abyss and found true enlightenment!” yelled a bald Oblivion cult member. He was dressed in clothes that were falling apart, and smelled just as bad as he looked. Most would consider him homeless, if it wasn’t for the cult’s little enclave that housed them all.

Washburn blew out his cheeks and stepped forward, well aware that Wei was just standing there like a bump on a log. What exactly did he do, other than point the expensive police robots at problems?

“I’m sorry about your friend here. I assure you it’s never our intention to see harm come to any Sanctuary residents,” Washburn said. He tried to sound sincere with his apology, although he was anything but. If it was up to him, he’d load all of them into the airlock.

Then they can all be one with the Abyss. Crazy sons of bitches.

“No, Mr. Mayor, you should be happy!” answered a female member of the cult. “Our brother has finally fulfilled his destiny, his dream, his purpose.”

Well, at least he knew it was a ‘he.’ “Uh, well, thanks, I guess,” Washburn said, aware it wasn’t his most eloquent moment. “What’s his name? Does he have family on board, on Earth or on one of the colonies? Who needs to be contacted?”

Washburn was aware that he should step forward, rather than hiding behind the relative safety of the ever-vigilant police robots, but there were limits to his interest in appearing sympathetic.

“We are his family,” replied the bald cult member. “You are his family; every living thing is his family, and he’ll join them in the sweet everlasting peace of death. Because that, Mr. Mayor, that’s unity.”

And you’re insane. There’s nothing peaceful about dying. Maybe if one of these nut jobs were in my shoes right now...

“What can I do to make this right and get y’all to calm the hell down?” asked Washburn.

“We apologize, Mr. Mayor,” said the female cult member, projecting her voice so all the gathering crowd could hear her. “We simply wanted you *all* to know what’s coming. To inform you that the rapture, the rapture for all of us, is on its way. And when it does come, oh my, when it does, we will all have the privilege of becoming one with the deep cold black of the Abyss.”

“So...are y’all gonna calm down?” Washburn said when she seemed to awkwardly stop talking.

The bald cult member smiled while making eye contact with Washburn. Pupils dilated, eyes bloodshot, he looked high on something. “Of course, sir. Of course.”

All at once the Oblivion cultists calmly stood down. They retreated back into their enclave, happy as could be. Washburn, on the other hand, was left with a mess to clean up.

“Uh.” Washburn slowly turned to Wei. The sheriff was a good dozen feet behind him. “Sheriff,” he said respectfully, still aware of the crowd.

“Sir?”

Washburn tried to spur him to action with his eyes, but when it was clear that wasn’t going to work before he developed a tic, Washburn said, “Could you please deal with this crime scene?”

“Ah.” Wei seemed to wise up and walk over so they could talk more quietly.

Washburn looked down at the dead cultist. He was face-down in a pool of his own blood. “Get this guy out of here. Get this blood cleaned up. And prepare to make a statement to the station residents about this. Make sure to keep it from sounding too gruesome, okay?”

“Can’t you—”

“No, Wei,” Washburn said. “I can’t. You need to.”

Wei ran his hand through his hair. “Okay.”

“I gotta go do the mornin’, uh, shit—” Washburn’s HUD lit up with another incoming video call.

“What?” Wei looked up, but Washburn waved him away as he walked from the scene of the incident and answered the call. It was Angie Ngyou, head of the station’s communication department, or Comdep. “What can I do for you, Ms. Ngyou?”

“Mr. Mayor...” There was hesitation in Angie’s voice, which was unusual. She was a strong, decisive leader in her department who bled an aura of confidence. Not this morning. “You really need to come meet me at the viewing deck.”

“Why? What is it now?”

“Sir, I think it’ll be better if you just come see it. Now.”

“I’m not in the mood for mysteries, Ms. Ngyou. Just give it to me straight.”

“We have guests, sir. A ship just arrived outside the station from a fold jump. UEF, by the look of it.”

“Well, y’all know what to do. Offer them boys sanctuary, blah, blah, reassure them that they’re safe here and we got any supplies they might need for sale. What’s the problem?”

“We did that.”

“And?”

“Sir...I really think you should come take a look first.”

TWENTY-SEVEN

LEE

“WHAT ARE OUR OPTIONS, MAJOR?” asked Saito.

“We have enough juice for one fold jump. The problem is, our navigation is only barely functional, and it’s going to be impossible to pick a precise location. Add to that the fact that we can’t go that far, and, well...” Chevenko spun around to glance up to the captain’s chair that the very tired Saito sat in. “We don’t have many good choices here.”

“Do we have enough to get to any UEF-controlled planet or station?” Saito knew the answer before asking the question.

“Nothing UEF, no. We’re too far out, close to uncharted space. Which is our only viable option, unless you want to jump further into AIC territory.”

“Uncharted space? What do we have out there?” Saito didn’t want to lead his men into space’s version of the Wild West, but he saw no other choice.

“We’ve been able to lock onto the beacon of a sanctuary station. We can go there, but we haven’t been able to raise them on comms, nor do we know anything about it. It could be one of those the AIC ‘commandeered’ back at the beginning of the war.”

“Far as I see it, Major, we don’t have a choice. That’s our destination; set the course,” ordered Saito.

“How about the enemy still on board?” asked Chevenko. It was a valid and important question. No one knew how many hostiles were on board, and no one knew how to eliminate them.

“Pull up a thermal image of the ship. I want the whole thing.”

“Sir, yes sir.” Chevenko switched every camera on board the *Atlas* to thermal imaging. Then she consolidated all of them to make one cohesive

thermal map of the ship.

“Now transfer it over to my HUD,” ordered Saito.

We need to purge part of the ship. These things don't like the cold. If we can warn our men and women that it's about to get really chilly and we're going to fold jump, they can bundle up and hold on.

“Okay, you see these spots? Those are the enemy. It looks like most of them are around...damn, they're around the med bay.” Saito realized that a hard task had just been made so much more difficult.

We need to warn them without tipping off those things. If we can slow them down with the cold, maybe that'll give us enough time to get all of our men up here to the front of the ship, seal off the rest.

“What do you want to do, sir?” asked Chevenko.

“I, we, can go back out there, bring back as many of our men and women as possible before the jump,” Ada volunteered.

“No one leaves this bridge until we're out of this. Major, get on comms. See if they can connect me directly to everyone's onboard HUD. I want to talk to them through HUDs instead of PAs.”

“Sir, yes, sir.”

It took about fifteen minutes, but the communication division on the *Atlas* was able to connect Saito directly to the remaining crew's HUDs. He knew he had to be careful; clearly he didn't know who could be trusted on his ship. He wasn't even sure the creatures wouldn't be able to use the HUDs. In fact, he assumed they could, but they were slow.

“Attention, crew of the *Atlas*. This is your captain. I understand that you're in the fight of your lives, *for* your lives. But I need you to disengage and find safety and warmth. These enemies on our ship are not AIC soldiers, as I'm sure any of you who have encountered them have noticed. Normal weaponry doesn't work, but we think we've found something that has.

“Migrate to the front third of the ship. Anywhere past section fifty-six will suffice. If able, please help any injured crewmembers from the med bay to safety. In exactly five minutes from the end of this message, I will seal off any section south of fifty-six and completely turn off any life support systems. So please, move fast, be safe, and I hope to see you soon.”

Just one. We just need one break. Please.

Seconds after the end of Saito's message to his crew, the remaining AIC dreadnoughts began to move in on the *Atlas*. It was either terrible timing, or

they'd heard the message. Either way, it was going to squeeze their timetable.

"With what little armor we have left, it'll only take a couple of volleys for those dreadnaughts to finish us off," said Chevenko.

"We just need to give them a little more time." Saito's eyes were trained on the thermal camera images. He watched as his crew moved as fast as they could north of section fifty-six, as instructed. His hand hovered over the button to seal off the rest of the ship south of that.

"Sir, we don't have time."

"I'll tell you when we have time," Saito snapped. "Spin up the fold engines."

Come on, move, dammit!

"Prepared for the fold jump," Chevenko said. This would normally be the point where Saito would have her inform the crew of the time to jump and tell them to take their seats. Instead, there was simply silence on the bridge.

"Inbound," snapped Chevenko. "Full spread."

Saito took a deep breath and pressed the button. Immediately the back two thirds of the *Atlas* were cut off from the bridge and the front third.

Chevenko looked back at her captain. "I'm sorry, sir."

"No time for being sorry right now, Major. How long until we jump?"

"Twenty seconds, sir," Chevenko informed him as she and everyone else on the bridge saw, on what screens were left, tiny dots of bright light appearing in front of the enemy dreadnaughts. Those dots got bigger and bigger.

Saito put on his mag bracelets. Then he addressed the crew, or what was left of them. The die was cast now; no reason to use anything but the PAs. "We're jumping in seconds. If you don't have a seat, please hold on to whatever you can. This is going to be a rough one. I'll see you on the other side, whatever that may be."

"Ten seconds," Chevenko said.

Saito cut off the life-support systems to the back two thirds of the *Atlas*. That meant there were no oxygen and no heat. It wouldn't be long until the halls turned into ice boxes, freezing what he wanted to believe were only enemies. But he knew—he saw it on the cameras—he was leaving men behind to die.

"Brace for impact!" yelled a crewmember on the bridge.

“Three.

“Two.

“One—”

Chevenko’s countdown was cut off by the massive impact of several AIC torpedoes colliding with the *Atlas* at the instant the fold jump initiated.

TWENTY-EIGHT

BEN

“WHAT’RE YOU WAITING FOR, BENNY-BOY?” asked Ace. He stood behind Ben like a watchful schoolteacher. “Shoot the little bastard so we can get out of here.”

Ben stood over a terrified Oblivion cult member, pistol in hand. It wasn’t that he’d never killed a man; he was a soldier in a time of war. But he’d never killed a defenseless man, and calling the cowering twenty-something on the street below him a man might’ve been a little generous.

“We need the data,” Ben said.

“We don’t need him alive for that.”

“What we really need is to move,” Morgan said. “The big bad DC police are going to be here any minute.” She kicked a dying cult member on the ground in front of her.

“What’s the problem?” Ace asked.

He walked up behind Ben, which bothered him. It was a pushy move. “I’m not killing people that don’t need killing, Ace,” Ben said.

Ben looked at the pistol in his prosthetic hand. He’d declined the option of faux skin. His entire arm was metal, servos, and wires. That way he’d remember every time he saw it.

It wasn’t the physical pain of the terrorist attack that made it all come back to Ben. What really stung were all those others there he couldn’t save. That helplessness...

“For the record, you were the lookout,” Ben said. “This was a simple job until you forgot how to, you know, *look out*.”

“They saw us too fast. It happens. Everything is fine. Just shoot him.”

“I’m not just shooting him,” Ben said again.

“Have you forgotten what they did to you?” Ace asked. “What they did to your mother?”

Ben quickly jerked his shoulder up, hitting Ace in the chin. Ace yelped and jerked back, blood on his lip from where he’d bitten his tongue. “Shit, man. What the hell?”

“I told you not to talk about my mother.”

Ace wiped the blood away. “Damn, you could’ve just told me to shut up or something.”

“We have about thirty seconds,” said Morgan, who’d hacked into, watched, and tracked the police’s progress responding to their crime scene. “You two gonna keep flirting up there, or can we get this done?”

“Got it.” Ben pistol-whipped the young cultist until he was knocked unconscious. It only took a couple of blows.

“Careful not to hurt him too bad,” Ace sneered.

Ben ignored him and took out a neural net. It was meant to hack into an individual’s HUD and rapidly download any data. After putting it on the kid’s temple, he knew it would take about ten seconds.

“You’re soft, Benny-boy. Gonna have to toughen you up,” Ace said.

“Just find us a way out of here.”

Ace was looking up at the building facades around them.

“You get it?” Morgan asked Ben.

The light on the neural net turned green. “Got it,” he said.

“Let’s move,” Ace said. “Being this low gives me the creeps.”

They were on the Washington, DC street level. If they were going to get away, evade capture, the answer was above them. It was more likely they could lose the cops in the multiple levels of the megacity.

“We meet back at the ship in...” Ben looked at the time in his HUD. “Thirty minutes. Now get out of here.” He used his new-found captaincy to order Morgan and Ace to disperse. Everyone going their own way made it harder for the cops to catch them.

As Ace and Morgan disappeared into the megacity, Ben heard sirens. Above him he saw slivers of search lights that tried to filter through the levels above the street. He was out of time.

Ben had two choices. He could run into the alleyways and look for stairs up to the levels above. It would leave him more exposed, but it was the quickest way up. Any elevators and lifts up in the area had surely been shut down by the DC police. Or he could enter the bottom floor of the

nearby apartment blocks and go up from there. The advantage of that path was the inherit cover of a building, and he could come out at any level.

Ben bolted for the apartment block door. The door was locked. After a quick glance around, he kicked at the door with his artificial leg. On the third try, the door burst inward.

“Freeze!” shouted a robotic voice behind him. “You are under arrest! By the authority of the District of Columbia Police Department!”

Damn robots.

“Comply! Or we will open fire!”

Ben put his hands on his head. “I’m complying, assholes,” he said. He turned around long enough to verify they were the old shit-lickers with modified tract feet. Good for the grimy ground level. Not so good for rushing upstairs.

He spun around again and dove headfirst into the kicked-open doorway. The robots opened fire almost instantly.

TWENTY-NINE

BEN

BEN DUCKED AND DODGED, barely missed by the super-heated high-speed rounds that burst through the concrete of the apartment block. Pieces of the walls and melted rebar scratched and burned him as he scurried up the stairs.

Floor by floor, Ben hurried up the stairwell, leaving the slower-moving robots behind. They would radio ahead, of course, but at least he had a chance.

On the way, he heard tenants in the hallways beyond, and the sounds of the city. But he focused on his own breathing as he tried to at least reach the twentieth floor.

Wise to his escape plan, DCPD officers on foot entered the apartment block from above. They rushed downwards, down the stairs towards Ben. He had to improvise.

Ben looked up and saw the sign for the tenth level. *That'll do*, he thought. He shoulder-checked the door and found himself in a concrete hallway with a moldy rug, lined with doors on both sides.

Ben almost fell a couple of times as he hurried down a long straight hallway looking for an exit. The hallway took a hard 90-degree turn, and Ben shot around the blind corner—

And collided with a DCPD police officer. They both fell to the floor. Ben was momentarily dazed, but came to his senses quickly enough to realize what had happened.

He lunged at the officer, who was bumbling for his firearm while getting to his feet. A normal man wouldn't have been able to punch out a

cop, due to their full head-encompassing helmets. But Ben had a robotic arm.

He crashed his fist into the cop's helmet just as he drew his firearm. The cop fired wildly, then dropped the weapon as his helmet cracked and he stumbled back, dazed again. He toppled over, completely knocked out. Or worse. Ben suddenly had the mental image of killing the cop with a single blow.

But he saw the chest rise and fall under the cop's body armor, and that was enough for him.

Ben leaped over the prone officer. Either the officer was playing possum, or he'd just regained consciousness in that moment, but either way, he reached out and grabbed Ben's ankle as he went over. Ben toppled forward.

Without thinking, Ben started kicking at the cop with his free prosthetic leg.

He kicked and kicked, like he had at the door. He was desperate to get away, and didn't stop until he heard a crack.

That sinking feeling inside his gut made him realize what had just happened.

It wasn't the helmet cracking.

The officer was perfectly still. His chest wasn't moving. Ben knew the man was dead. He must've broken the officer's neck.

"Shit, shit, shit," Ben screamed at himself. Now he was a cop-killer.

Ben jumped to his feet and continued on, looking for an exit. He found one in the form of thick shatter-proof sliding doors.

Before emerging from the apartment block, Ben frantically looked around through the glass sliding doors. What he saw was a typical elevated street on the tenth level. Mostly consisting of little stalls and stands selling everything from food to rugs, it was a market, which was perfect. He saw a police cruiser fly by up above, and waited until it passed to go outside.

Moving through the crowds of the market, Ben had to walk the line between blending in and moving with haste. The ship, the *Lost*, was docked on level thirty at the public docking bay. Getting there was going to take a little while, especially with the police combing the area for him and his compatriots. Things were only going to get worse when the cops realized one of their own had been killed.

Ben froze when, through the crowds of the tenth level, he saw DCPD officers slowly making their way through the crowd. They stopped anyone they saw that looked at all suspicious, and checked their paperwork. Naturally he wanted to turn around, but then saw the police cruiser was returning his way. He was stuck between the two.

Options, asshole, what are your options? Think, think, think.

Ben came to a simple, yet not ideal, solution. Every level had access ladders that went all the way to the top. But they weren't well-maintained, and were only ever used by fire departments and engineers in case of emergencies or needed maintenance. To get to it, though, he needed to go down one level and run underneath the approaching DCPD officers.

Ben turned and made his way through the crowd. He yelled a question at one of the open market stalls, figuring the quickest way not to draw attention in the crowd was to try to draw attention. Sure enough, the market man barely heard him over the din, and Ben was able to nod his way until he was beyond the main corridor to a narrow side walkway. It had an unguarded ledge with no safety rails. When he got there, all he needed to do was drop down to the ninth level.

It was quieter here, and Ben had to be more careful. He ducked behind the stall of an old woman who was selling trinkets and took a peek over the edge. His HUD told him it was a fifteen-foot drop down to the ninth level. It was further than he hoped for, and he was unlucky enough that the two levels nearly lined up, but he managed to stick the landing without falling to his death.

He did manage to almost fall on a guy, who cursed him out as he slunk away. A quick glance told him there were no cops on this level: not yet, at least. Ben hurried towards the old service ladder. The second he grabbed the rusty rungs, he wished he'd brought gloves. Each one he ascended cut a little more into his bloody palm. He tried to swing himself up with his prosthetic arm and almost ripped a rung off. A couple simply gave way under his weight, making his stomach jump up into his throat for just a moment. In order to prevent people from falling off, the ladder was surrounded by crisscrossing metal rings every three feet or so. He was on the outside of the apartment block proper now, and traffic sped just an arm's length away. In theory, the police could ID him here and he'd be a dead man.

But he was going to be tough to spot. Still, every step seemed to take an eternity.

Unpleasant as it was, the service ladder helped Ben go up twelve levels in about ten minutes. He was well on his way to the same floor as the public docks, but he couldn't shake the feeling that maybe it was a little too easy.

“Freeze! Don't move! You're under arrest by the authority given by the District of Columbia! Stay there, we will send a cruiser to pick you up!” A police drone floated in the air at the twenty-first level. It shone a spotlight on him.

Ben glanced at the lip of the level he was next to. Level 22. He didn't even pretend to obey the drone. It didn't have nearly the firepower of the robots on the ground level. He scrambled up and over the ledge, expecting to get shot in the back.

THIRTY

BEN

THE DRONE DID FIRE, belatedly, but most of the bullets ricocheted and bounced off the metal rings meant to protect the ladder climber from falling off. A couple made their way through the cracks, but hit Ben's prosthetics. Someone must've been looking after him. Maybe his mother.

Would she be ashamed of the cop he'd killed? Part of him knew he deserved to take a couple of those shots. He deserved to die right there and then.

He started to run. Ace had had an illegal scrambler installed in Ben's HUD upon joining the *Lost's* crew. Identifying and tracking him was nearly impossible now, unless he was within sight.

That would have to do. He'd have to try and lose the drone in the crowds.

As the midway point of the megacity, 22 was the point where the scenery changed. This was where most of DC's middle class lived. There were small coffee shops and diners, but no open-air stalls or markets, and it was significantly less crowded. That meant less cover.

The drone popped up and tagged him visually. Ben cursed to himself. Nothing to be done now. He turned into a small deserted walkway. There was less chance of him or the drone killing somebody else here. His profile was high enough already.

He took his pistol out of his holster. There was another maintenance ladder here; they seemed to be everywhere in the haphazard block. He waited there for the drone, hoping to use the ladder cage as cover. He waited for a three-count after he saw the drone turn into the walkway. He fired three shots. The first two hit the front of the drone, but didn't do much

damage. They were just to help him home in on the third bullet that hit the mark, directly in the drone's camera/eye. The super-heated bullet flew through it and out the back of the machine.

The drone stuttered in the air, then dropped like a sack of potatoes without ever getting a shot off.

That was lucky. Ben started to climb up this mysterious new ladder, but it only went another level before it dead-ended, along with his luck.

He couldn't go back out to the main ladder. He was down to his last option. The worst one.

Ben ran towards an elevator bank that could take him to the thirtieth level. He was sure that the police would be able to ID him easily once inside.

As he drew closer, he saw that a crowd of upset people was gathered around. The elevators were shut down.

Ben heard the unmistakable hum of a police hoverbike coming up from below. It was following along the inside of the elevator shaft. He had seen them do this before. Soon the doors would open, and the hoverbike would come in. The bikes had remote access to the shaft controls. This biker, or one of his pals below, must have shut down the elevators and taken controls of the shafts.

Ben knew that in moments, the doors would open, and he'd be face-to-face with the bike rider. The crowd would offer some cover, but only for so long.

He turned and started to rush back the way he came. Then he saw a dozen new police drones pouring up and over the edge of the ladder he'd come up.

Shit.

He turned back to the shaft, a crazy idea forming in his mind. A crazy, stupid, reckless idea.

It wasn't that the idea had any real merit. It was just that he was out of options.

Crazy it was.

Ben rushed forward. Some in the crowd had seen his waffling and must have known something was going on. They pointed him out, and everyone in the group seemed to turn in unison as Ben ran straight at them.

"Move!" he screamed, waving his gun in the air. The crowd parted—more reluctantly than he would have thought, considering a lunatic with a

gun was rushing at them, but then again, this was DC. Somebody screamed something in his ear as he rushed through.

Without stopping, he leapt at the elevator door, thinking how stupid he was going to look if the doors didn't open.

And they almost didn't. But at the last moment, they snapped open. The timing was so tight that his shins grazed the inside lining of the doors.

He flew through, balance all wrong, leaning backwards, legs splayed wildly.

He almost flew right over everything. As it was, he had to reach down and desperately hook his arm around the neck of the hoverbike's rider. Naturally, the cop was pulled off the vehicle by his body weight. Ben would've flown off with him if his artificial hand hadn't managed to grab the gravity-defying bike and hold on.

DCPD's standard-issue hoverbikes were built to hold up to five hundred pounds. That took into account not only the weight of the person piloting the vehicle, but also if they had a prisoner on the back. With that said, they weren't meant to carry all that weight from the rear of the vehicle, where Ben hung on.

Slowly the hoverbike lowered as it struggled to hold Ben's weight. He managed to pull himself up onto the seat. Once he had a grip on the handlebars, he felt comfortable. He was where he was supposed to be as a former Navy pilot: flying.

Ben turned the hoverbike around and ignored the screams and expletives from the cop who'd landed just a few levels below on one of the inset ledges. He burst-fired back out of the still-open elevator shaft doors just as the officer started shooting up at him.

The crowd, which had started to reform, again scattered as Ben shot past them.

He had to find a good path up through traffic on every level in order to get up to the public docks, and he needed to do it fast, because this wasn't a low-visibility way of travel.

There wasn't any time for Ben to contemplate his path, due to the fact that two police cruisers had caught up with him. There were also a handful of drones now watching his movements.

He was a very, very marked man.

The cruisers cut in front of him less than a hundred yards ahead, blocking his way. Ben should slow down, or at least change course.

He did neither.

THIRTY-ONE

BEN

BEN TWISTED HIS WRIST FORWARD, causing the hoverbike to speed towards the cruisers. At the last moment, before colliding with them, he pulled the handlebars back towards his chest and angled up. The exhaust from the hoverbike's engines stripped paint off the hood of one of the cruisers, it was so close.

It was a strange thing to say, but this was probably the first time since the terrorist attacks that had taken his limbs and his mother that Ben had yelled out in pure joy.

He was happy piloting a vehicle, any vehicle. He smiled as he weaved through the traffic flying up-level, just narrowly missing getting hit. The cruisers, sirens blaring, followed him up.

Ben led the two police cruisers through the narrow alleys in between apartment blocks and super skyscrapers. He ducked, dipped, and juked in and out of the tightest spaces he could find, hoping that the cops wouldn't follow. They did. It became clear that he wasn't dealing with amateurs. He needed to turn up the danger a bit.

Ben saw a fair bit of construction up ahead. With it came a lot of scaffolding. And then he saw them.

Garbage chutes.

Ben twisted the accelerator forward and leaned over hard, speeding his hoverbike up. He'd missed the roar of an engine, even if this time it was between his legs. He'd missed the feeling of the wind in his face and the g-forces that pushed him back when he accelerated.

Ben had to duck as he sped directly into the maze of scaffolding. He took a couple of scrapes and cuts as he just barely fit through. Construction

workers dived out of the way. Some jumped off the scaffolding; only their mag harnesses kept them from plummeting to probable deaths.

The two cruisers followed as far as they could, but not into the scaffolding. There was no way they'd fit in there. But they followed just outside of it, determined not to let him out of their sights.

Here we go. Mom, I may be seeing you sooner than I thought.

Ben took a sharp turn up into the garbage chute outside the super skyscraper. Just as he got started navigating the chute, he got a call on his HUD. It was Morgan.

"Captain, oh Captain....where the hell are you?" asked Morgan.

"I'm a little busy!" he shouted.

"So, close then?" she asked.

"Yes, I'm close. Shit!" Ben looked behind him. The chute caught fire, and was threatening to catch up with him before the cops. "Just don't leave without me! End call!"

Ben knew that he couldn't follow the garbage chute all the way up, since it went to the top of the super skyscraper, far above the public docks. Plus, someone was bound to use the chute for its original purpose. Even as he thought it, he saw pieces of plaster falling down from above.

Ducking down so that he didn't lose his head on the top of the chute, Ben managed to swing one leg over and have both on one side of the hoverbike. He took one hand off the handlebars and took out his pistol. Simultaneously he jumped and fired at the canvas in front of him.

He couldn't imagine his mom would approve, but somebody up there liked him, because not only did his plan work—he burst through the canvas, free from the triple threat of falling plaster, burning garbage chute, and the hoverbike itself—but he managed to burst through more or less at the height of the nearest level rather than between them, where his fall would have been further. He still managed to land hard on his back, but he was alive.

The hoverbike quickly tangled with the chute and ignited the material around the tank, which led to a partial explosion and the spectacular sight of hoverbike parts ricocheting off in all directions. That caught everyone's attention, leaving him free to get up and discreetly walk away. He checked the nearest notification board and nearly fell over all over again.

He was on level thirty.

Somebody really was looking out for him up there.

Ben could see the public docks. He just had to walk past the shops nearby to get to them, and get to his ship, the *Lost*. Covered in scrapes, cuts, and bruises, people justifiably gave him weird looks as he passed.

Not that he cared. All he cared about was that he was still alive and not in police custody.

Then he saw an all-news bulletin across the newsstand he was walking past. His heart almost pounded out of his chest for a moment. Were they really sending out a bulletin on him? He thought back to the cop in the hallway. Shit, this was so much worse than he'd imagined—

Then he saw the alert.

"*Atlas* lost!" said the headline link transmitted into his HUD as he passed. He didn't want to, but couldn't help himself.

"Open link," said Ben. His HUD opened the video news story.

THIRTY-TWO

BEN

“IN THE LATEST on the historic mission of peace by the *Atlas*, the UEF has now confirmed the widely circulated rumor that *all* communications, both primary and secondary, have been lost with the state-of-the-art dreadnought. Sources say that after their scheduled fold jump, the Navy has not been able to get in contact with the crew. There is a growing consensus that the AIC, who were meant to meet with the *Atlas* on Vassar-1, are responsible. I go now to our reporter Tracy Hashimoto on Calatan station, outside AIC-controlled space.” A beautiful DC news reporter appeared in a video window on Ben’s HUD.

“Thank you, Vanya. I’m here with Navy Admiral Linda White. Admiral, do you have any comments on the reports saying that all communication has been lost with the *Atlas*?”

Next to her stood a stoic, professional-looking woman clad in a stars-and-bars-adorned uniform. “All we can say at this moment is that we’re having trouble raising the *Atlas*, but that’s no reason to worry. Often, after fold jumps, communications can be temporarily lost. Now, I assure you and your viewers that we are doing everything in our power and can guarantee that the crew of the *Atlas* are doing everything they can to restore said communications,” said Admiral White.

“How about the families of those on board who’ve been trying to reach the Navy, asking about the status of their loved ones? What do you have to say to them?” asked Hashimoto.

Admiral White gave her an obvious dirty look. “I would tell them not to worry. Their loved ones are on the most advanced, safe, and heavily-armed ship ever sent into space. Even in the very unlikely event that they were met

with any resistance, I'd assure those families of those brave men and women that they're more than equipped to handle and dispose of any opposition."

Ben slowed, but didn't stop in his tracks. This wasn't news, not really. He'd known the very first rumors were likely true ever since he'd seen those detailed schematics on the *Atlas* that the Oblivion had. But somehow, hearing the government admit it made it hit home for him.

He closed out the video window and took a moment to digest what he'd just heard. What was he going to do? He could ignore it, and leave his father to his fate. Then again, he did captain a ship now. Well, sort of. Could he convince Ace and Morgan to go try and find him?

Should he? It would put them all in danger, on a mission they almost certainly wanted nothing to do with.

"Hey you!" Ben heard a man yell. He looked over and saw an angry-looking officer coming toward him. He raised a rifle, and there were muffled screams. He had black soot all down one side of his uniform. It was the same one he'd dragged off the hoverbike, Ben was sure of it. "Don't move!"

Naturally Ben ran. No shots were fired, as he'd hoped. Raising a rifle in a crowd would get that cop reprimanded. Firing it would do much worse for his career.

"Call Morgan," Ben ordered his HUD. "Now!"

Ben figured that he must've really pissed that cop off, because he was firing at him into a crowd of people. It wasn't a dense crowd, but still.

"Let me guess," Morgan said. "You're really close this time."

The crowd was thinning. The cop would start shooting soon. Just then, a bullet whizzed past him.

"What do you think?" Ben ducked. "Be prepped to launch!"

"Was that a gunshot?"

"Just be ready! End call!"

Ben saw the *Lost* on the other side of the public docks. He looked back to see how close his pursuer was, and almost soiled himself when he saw the one cop had turned into six cops, somehow. His natural leg ached, so he let the metal one do the brunt of the work as it pushed him just a little bit faster.

As Ben was less than thirty feet away from the *Lost*, he saw Ace calmly walk out onto the open loading ramp.

He held a very large gun.

Without a word, Ace opened up. Ben had to duck as the shots just barely missed taking off his head. He closed the distance quickly, then dove onto the loading ramp.

Ace calmly spun around. Ben looked back to see the damage Ace had caused. Two of the cops were down, their comrades checking on them while shooting back, their bullets bouncing off the *Lost's* shields.

“Dammit, stop shooting!”

“You’re welcome,” Ace said in a monotone voice as he followed Ben up the loading ramp.

“Let’s get the hell out of here!” Ben yelled as he reached the cockpit of the small ship.

“Thought you’d never ask,” said Morgan from the pilot’s seat. She decoupled the docking locks and slowly ascended.

Ace sauntered in.

“What the hell was that?” Ben barked, right up in Ace’s grill. He couldn’t say why he was so angry about it. He’d killed a cop already today, but he hadn’t meant to. Somehow the distinction mattered to Ben. Maybe it was the casual way that Ace had done it.

“That? Oh, that was just me saving your damn life. No thanks necessary, though.”

“You killed them!”

“You don’t know that. And even if I did…” Ace pushed Ben off of him. “Why do you care?”

“Because they’re just cops doing their job. They’re innocent.” Ben remembered the image of the cop he’d killed inside the apartment block.

“I’m a cop, or I used to be,” Ace said. “They weren’t *that* innocent.”

“Just because you were dirty doesn’t mean the rest of us were,” Morgan said.

“Not dirty,” Ace said. “Opportunistic.”

“Sounds like it rhymes with dirty,” Ben said.

“You telling me that you didn’t kill any innocents in the war, soldier boy? You telling me your hands are clean?”

Ben didn’t answer. He just solemnly walked over to his beaten-up captain’s chair and plopped down.

“Yeah, I didn’t think so.” Ace took his position in the cockpit. “Besides, what does it matter? We’re never coming back here again.”

Ben glanced out the forward cockpit. He could just see the curve of the planet growing more prominent as they rose.

He had a feeling he wasn't going to see Earth again for a long time.

THIRTY-THREE

LEE

COMING out of a fold jump was never easy. Even under the best circumstances, it was jarring. When you did so on a disabled wreck of a ship, it was so much worse.

No one on board the UEF *Atlas* came out of their last desperate gambit comfortably. Some of the crew were lucky enough to have seats for the highly dangerous form of travel. Most were left to just hold on to something. Unsurprisingly, that led to mixed results.

Saito half expected the *Atlas* to be torn to pieces during the fold jump. So when they arrived at whatever their destination was, mostly in one piece, it was the first bit of good news he'd had since the ambush.

Ada got up off the floor of the bridge. Despite being able to keep her cool all through the horror of the last few hours, she couldn't seem to stop herself from throwing up. Saito knew the feeling. That jump had left his guts feeling riled up, too. At least two others on the deck were involuntarily emptying the contents of their stomachs.

"Status?" inquired Saito as he removed his mag bracelets.

"Sir...yes sir. Standby, running diagnostics." Chevenko shook her head, and Saito could see she was trying to shake out the cobwebs and the horrible sensation that there was liquid sloshing around in her skull. She stiffened, and Saito could only imagine things got worse when she saw just how much damage the fold jump had done.

"Major?" Saito looked out at his crew on the deck. Most of them were okay. Some were injured. Those who were the least negatively affected by the trauma of a fold jump had tried to corral in the dead from earlier to stop them from sliding around the bridge.

“Sir...we, uh...I’ll just show you. Transfer diagnostics to Saito.” Chevenko clearly didn’t know how to describe to her captain what had happened to his ship.

Saito had mixed feelings when he saw the damage to the *Atlas*. A large chunk of the ship was gone: the back two thirds. While that meant that most—if not, hopefully, all—of the enemies who’d boarded them were lost somewhere in time and space, it also meant that they were truly dead in the water. There was no steering, no chance of restoring the engines; they had no control over their own fate. They were at the mercy of space and hopefully, if everything had worked out the way it was supposed to, they were near a space station.

Proximity alarms suddenly rang out on the deck in the form of a flashing yellow light. An automated voice rang out over the public announcement system.

“Warning, collision alert, four hundred and thirteen miles. Warning, collision alert, four hundred and three miles. Warning...”

“Bring up the bridge screen,” ordered Saito.

“Bridge screen isn’t functional, sir,” replied Chevenko.

“Then retract it and open the bridge window.”

“Retracting screens.” Chevenko pressed a couple of buttons, and the huge bridge screen slid away. It wasn’t the only part of the bridge that did; metal shutters were also pulled back, revealing a thick window about a third of the size.

Saito got up out of his chair and walked over to the window. Space outside was spinning, as was the *Atlas*, so he only caught glimpses of what they were going to collide with.

It was a space station. They’d hit their mark. But if they weren’t careful, they were going to run into their mark and probably destroy not only their ship, but a station full of people.

“Can we raise that station?” Saito was addressing anyone on the bridge who could reach out.

“We tried, sir,” said one of the comms crew that Saito didn’t know.

“And?”

“We weren’t able to talk to them, but we did send out our mayday signal.”

“So they know we’re here?”

“They should.”

“That doesn’t exactly fill me with confidence,” Saito said. They’d survived the ambush and fold jump, but there was no way they’d survive a head-on collision with a space station.

“Sir?”

“I need everyone on this bridge to retreat to the escape shuttles below us. Don’t disembark until you receive my order, but board and prepare to take off,” he said. He walked up to Chevenko. “Relay that order to the rest of the ship, and then join them.”

“How about you, sir?” Chevenko asked.

“I’ll be right here in case they try to communicate and get through to us. Go. And Major, thank you. You saved a lot of lives today, including my own.”

“Sir,” nodded Chevenko before she tapped into the PA system.

Saito calmly walked back over to the window and stared out. He didn’t see the stars or the black abyss of space. He saw his wife Beverly.

Beverly was in her sundress, barefoot, dancing in the grass. It was the last week of Naval Officer school, and Saito was stressed out about the final exams and command observations. In an attempt to get his mind off the pressures of graduation, she’d insisted they go out to the country in Virginia and spend the afternoon, have a picnic.

Saito, then just Lee, had his officer handbooks with him as he sat under the shade of a goliath willow tree. He couldn’t hear the chirping birds or buzzing insects. He didn’t feel the cool breeze coming off the Chesapeake. Nor could he hear his then-girlfriend’s pleas to put the handbooks down and dance with her.

Beverly took the handbook out of Lee’s hands. She haphazardly threw it away and threaded her fingers into his. Her smile was brighter than the sun that shined down on them that beautiful cloudless day.

“C’mon, Lee. Don’t be such a grump. Dance with me,” urged Beverly, her brilliant green eyes locked with his.

“There’s no music, babe. What are we supposed to dance to?”

“No music? Listen,” said Beverly. She stood still, held one cupped hand to her ear. “You don’t hear that?”

Without his attention buried in his officer’s handbook, Lee heard everything. He heard the bugs and birds. He heard the sound of the wind cutting through the grass and leaves. He heard the music of nature.

“You do, don’t you?” Beverly was so radiant and happy. Lee was so happy and in love.

All that happiness disappeared in a blink of an eye. It was replaced with the image of their ruined apartment in Annapolis, pieces of concrete hanging on by strands of steel rebar. As he entered the apartment looking for his wife, his Beverly, Saito saw her arm sticking out from under a pile of rubble.

The whole bridge shook and then came to an abrupt stop, sending Saito sliding across the floor. When he got up and went back to the window to see what was going on, he saw small rocket-propelled trapezoid-shaped objects flying towards the *Atlas*. There must’ve been almost a hundred of them.

“C’mon, boys,” he muttered under his breath. “Come and get us.”

Saito knew exactly what was going on. It was standard emergency docking protocol while out in the frontier of space. Legitimate enterprises rarely had to use the little rocket-propelled stabilizers to attach to and direct a rudderless ship. Typically it was the tool of pirates, but in this case, it was a tool of saviors.

THIRTY-FOUR

WASH

“LET’S see what we got here,” said Washburn as he stood in the docking bay of Sanc-33 with one hand on his hip, the other holding a fresh cup of coffee.

Behind Washburn were Wei, four armed members of the station crew, and six police mechs. They were all ready for whatever was going to come out of the large ship that slowly made its way through the plasma screens separating the inside of the docking bay from cold space. The emergency plasma rockets were taking their time.

“Jesus, looks like they’ve been through hell,” said Wei as he and the others looked at the damage the *Atlas* had endured.

“Get Royce and the other engineers down here. We may need to pry this big hunk of junk open like a sardine can,” ordered Washburn.

“On it.” Wei stepped away for a second and called George Royce, the head of station engineering, through his HUD.

The whole of Sanc-33 shook when the remains of the *Atlas* landed on the docking bay floor. A loud metallic scraping sound accompanied the closing of the shutters over the plasma in the docking bay.

“Well, here goes nothing. Let’s hope they’re friendly and grateful,” said Washburn as he calmly walked towards the *Atlas*. Docking bay workers sprayed the *Atlas* down with hot, steaming foam to try and counteract that extreme cold of space, and therefore the ship’s outer hull. This way, they could actually touch it without almost instant frostbite.

Washburn knocked on the wet metal hull of the *Atlas*. He then put his head against it, listening for any knocking back. There was nothing, so he moved on to another section and did the same thing. Still nothing.

“Sir! Mr. Mayor! The window!” One of the docking bay workers pointed at the bridge window on the *Atlas*.

A motorized staircase on wheels was brought up to the window, Washburn on the top of it. Still sipping his coffee, he looked through it and saw Saito standing there, waving at him. Washburn waved back.

“Who is it, sir?”

“Some guy,” answered Washburn. He looked at the uniform. “Military. Probably an officer or something.” Washburn’s dad had done a rotation. Said it was good for the résumé. Wash hadn’t, but like so many other things in his life, things had just worked out for him. He knew enough to know all the bars on the guy’s arm meant something, but Wash couldn’t be bothered to know what. “There’s survivors inside, let’s get this open and get them out.”

“But what if they’re hostile?” asked Wei.

“We’re a sanctuary station, Sheriff,” Washburn said, annoyance creeping into his voice along with a scratch in the back of his throat. He coughed, mildly at first, but it gathered steam quickly. He was soon hanging off the arm of the staircase. “Hostile or not,” he said as he caught his breath, “we have to provide them shelter, food, and any care we can give. Get this tin can open, send whoever’s in charge to my office.” He half-walked, half-staggered down the steps. “I gotta go take my meds.”

WHAT’S TAKING SO LONG? They should’ve had them out of there an hour ago. Washburn impatiently waited in his office for whoever was in charge of the *Atlas*. He practiced different positions that would make him look powerful or in charge. He wanted to make a good impression on his new guests, but he never knew how to sit, or what to do with his hands. These sorts of things occupied way too much of his time and energy.

“Saito from the *Atlas* is here to see you, Mr. Mayor,” Washburn’s secretary, Melissa, informed him through his HUD.

“Send him in,” said Washburn.

A beaten-up-looking man entered Washburn’s office. There were so many bandages and Band-Aids that it looked like they were all that kept the aging military man together. Still, the mayor of Sanc-33 was intimidated.

Perhaps it was because he was looking at a man with real power; not like himself, who ruled over a fiefdom of small shops and apartments.

Washburn stood up and held out his hand. “Welcome to Sanctuary Station 33. I’m Mayor Jaime Washburn. And you are?”

The man shook his hand. His grip was brief and strong. “Saito. Captain Lee Saito, of the UEF *Atlas*.”

“Of course, Captain,” he said. “I’m the mayor of this humble hunk of junk here. And as a sanctuary station, we of course will provide you and your crew with anything you may need. We have provisions, such as food and water. You can stay in our guest bunks down on level three. I would offer to repair your ship, but...we can figure out another mode of transportation for you, if you so wish. And any medical care your crew may need would be our pleasure.”

“How safe is your station, Mayor Washburn?” asked Saito as he sat down in the seat across from Washburn’s desk.

“I assure you, your crew will be safe here. No matter what happens outside of these walls between the UEF and AIC, sanctuary stations are agreed neutral zones that no—”

“No, that’s not what I’m asking. How secure is this station? Can it withstand an attack?” Saito’s eyes looked cold, emotionless, defeated.

Washburn tried to keep the surprise off his face, but he didn’t like this turn one bit. “We’ve repelled the occasional pirate raid, but we’re not a military station. Why do you ask?”

“My crew...it’s important that you don’t let them out of the docking bay yet.”

“What?” Washburn asked in surprise. “You don’t want me to let your crew go get food, a shower, maybe some sleep?”

“It’s hard to explain, Mr. Mayor, but—”

“Call me Wash,” Washburn said. Saito raised an eyebrow. Washburn didn’t know why he said it. Everyone on the station called him Mayor. He liked it. What had possessed him now? Was he so intent on showing that this man didn’t intimidate him that he allowed him to do something he was very much *not* fine with?

“Okay, *Wash*,” Saito said. “I’m not sure they can all be trusted. We need to vet them first, make sure they aren’t...” Saito stared straight through Washburn as if he wasn’t even there.

“Aren’t what? I’m sorry, Captain. I want to help fulfill your requests here, but what do you think your crew is? Are they spies? Thieves? Bad tippers? Why don’t you trust them?”

“The Oblivion cult,” Saito said. “I’m sure you’ve heard of them.”

Washburn was stunned at that mention. How could this man know about the incident earlier? “Of course I have.” He hesitated. “We have a population of them here.”

Saito’s expression changed to one of anger. “Wait... you have cult members on board this station?”

“Of course. Like I said, we’re a sanctuary station. That doesn’t just apply to soldiers on different sides of a war, but we’re a haven for people of all religions.”

Saito shot up out of his chair. With both palms flat on Washburn’s desk, he leaned in close. “Listen to me, *Wash*, and listen good. You need to throw them in a cell with a signal blocker. Or even better yet, throw them out an airlock, because they’re calling trouble onto your head, probably right now. That kind of trouble is something you really don’t want.”

This guy is cracked, Washburn thought. *I don’t care what his rank is.*

“Mmhmm, is that so?” Washburn took a sip of his coffee. “Last time I checked, you were the captain of your ship, not this station. So I’d appreciate it if you didn’t try to tell me what I need to do.”

“You damn well need to—” Saito almost lost his cool, but he caught himself. “Sorry, Mayor, I didn’t mean to...” He took his hands off of Washburn’s desk. “Just please, watch your radar. Because they’re coming. I know it. I know in my gut that this isn’t over. And when they get here, you need to be prepared.” He paused. “We need to be prepared.”

“For what?”

“Death. Death is coming, and it doesn’t give a shit about sanctuaries.”

THIRTY-FIVE

ADA

“IS THIS REALLY NECESSARY?” asked Baez.

Ada shrugged. She liked Baez, but his constant complaining was getting on her nerves. As far as she could see, everyone was doing the best they could under the circumstances.

The rumors had spread like wildfire among the surviving crew in the docking bay. Those who had seen first-hand the shapeshifting characteristics of the creatures, and how ineffective their weapons had been, were far more understanding of the captain’s desperate ploy to detach the ship and fold jump. Those who hadn’t were the ones whispering the most.

Which made Ada struggle to understand Baez. He’d been there. He’d seen those things. What would he have done?

Understandably, no member of the *Atlas* crew was thrilled about being denied access to the rest of the station. No one enjoyed being quarantined. They knew there were food, drink, hot showers, and warm beds waiting just beyond its doors.

“We need to make sure that no member of the crew is compromised, Private. So yes, this is necessary until we figure all that out,” said Rollins. He sat on top of a metal crate as a Sanc-33 medic saw to the stump where his hand used to be.

“Compromised? Isn’t that just a nice way of saying that we aren’t one of those, those, I dunno, *monsters* that attacked us?” Baez was restless.

“Exactly,” said Rollins. “We can’t risk one of those things getting loose on this station and wreaking havoc.”

“Where’s Saito?” asked one of the engineers, lying on his back nearby. Precious few of them had made it forward beyond the cutoff.

“He’s trying to secure our place here on this station until we can find a way back home,” said Rollins.

A tall man in long tan overalls walked up. His lengthy face looked like a peanut to Ada.

“What happened out there?” He nodded up at the wreckage of the *Atlas*. “I’ve never seen damage like this before.”

“You a salvager or something?” Baez asked dismissively.

“Chief engineer on the station. George Royce.”

“It’s kind of a long story, Chief,” answered Ada, who had no interest in joining her disgruntled crew mates. She’d seen the enemy up close. She knew that Saito’s decision to quarantine them made sense.

Royce ran his hands along the battered hull. “Try me.”

“We were ambushed after a fold jump.”

“AIC?” asked Royce. It was a reasonable guess.

Ada and Baez exchanged a glance. “Not exactly,” she said. “Anyway, most of the damage was probably from the attack.”

“Yeah, I can see that. See this here?” Royce pointed at a large gash in one of the *Atlas*’ hull plates nearest them. “It’s shrapnel from a shooting star torpedo. AIC uses them to try and cripple ships without killing the people inside. Like a shotgun blast, bird shot, hit as much as you can. But there’s more here. The metal, it’s deformed, twisted. Did this happen in the fold jump?”

Ada hadn’t noticed it before, but upon seeing how the armored hull of the *Atlas* was mangled, she felt a little chill run down her spine. She knew that the forces being manipulated during fold jumps were powerful, but she’d never seen the results in person. The *Atlas* was so desperate to escape that the flight crew might’ve cut a few corners, resulting in a rockier than usual jump.

That, or the creatures had done it. Which would make them even more dangerous than they’d already seemed.

Another part of Ada just felt incredibly lucky to still be alive. Royce kept up a running lecture on the damage he was seeing, but her mind drifted. She pictured herself waking to a room full of injured and dead Marines. Then she’d survived the cruel death by the vacuum of space in the *Atlas*’ docking bay. Then she’d managed to fight her way through the ship alongside her captain. Now she stood in another docking bay, and should’ve felt safe. But she’d seen too much for that.

Ada knew there was a better than small chance that there were wolves among the sheep. Maybe that was why she chose to interact with a resident of the space station instead of her own comrades in arms.

“So what’s the plan?” Baez said impatiently. He said it loudly, and there was a general rumble of discontent nearby. “You going to shoot us all and see who survives, and there’s your monsters?”

Rollins clenched his jaw, waited a moment, then released and simply said, “Some of the staff have agreed to look over some personnel files and ask some basic questions about our pasts. They don’t know any of us, so they’ll be impartial.”

“I guess we don’t have much choice,” Baez said. He pointed over towards the doors to the docking bay. Standing guard were the police robots. “We try to leave and those robotic assholes are gonna shoot us.”

“No one is getting shot,” Rollins said.

The chatter quieted down when Ada heard a familiar voice behind her. “How bad is it?”

She turned to see Lieutenant Sousa. Unlike everyone else, he had hardly a scratch on him, lucky guy. Ada realized he was talking to the chief engineer.

“Well...it’s definitely not good. Which is a shame because this, this is one hell of a ship, or at least part of one. I can tell.” Royce stood with his hands on his hips, admiring the engineering that had gone into building something like the *Atlas*.

Sousa chuckled. “I’m guessing her maiden mission was her last mission.”

Royce nodded. “Guess so.”

Ada watched Sousa with squinted eyes and a raised eyebrow. “You okay, sir?”

“I’m fine. Why do you ask that?”

“Nothing,” she said at last. What she wanted to say was that they’d all just been through the shit, and he was the only one with a smile and a light-hearted remark. Maybe it was just his personality. She didn’t know the man well.

Maybe.

Sousa seemed to interpret her silence as concern. “I’m fine,” he said. “It just feels good to be alive.” He glanced at the chief engineer. “Royce, is it?”

Royce nodded.

“Is anything from the ship salvageable?” Sousa asked.

Ada backed away slowly as the engineer and Sousa talked. She went over to Rollins, who tried his hardest to keep the peace among the remaining *Atlas* crew. He wasn’t doing great.

She tried to get Rollins’s attention. “Commander?”

“Not now,” Rollins said.

Ada ignored his brush-off. She grabbed him by the arm, hard. “Sir,” she said.

Rollins turned to her and hissed, “Can’t you see I’m a little busy, Private?”

“We have a problem,” Ada looked over at Sousa. “I think we have a problem.”

“You *think* so?”

“I mean, a new problem.”

Rollins tapped his foot impatiently. “Well?”

Ada decided to just spit it out. She kept her voice just above a whisper. “That’s not Lieutenant Sousa.”

THIRTY-SIX

ADA

ROLLINS GLANCED CASUALLY AROUND AGAIN. “That’s a hell of an accusation, Private,” he said under his breath.

“He took you to the med bay back on the *Atlas*, didn’t he?” asked Ada.

“He did.”

“And he was with you the whole time?”

“Yes,” Rollins said. Then he paused. “Well, no. Those things attacked. He joined a couple other members of the crew out in the hall and fought them off, protecting the injured.”

“Did anyone else survive that fight?”

Rollins was quiet for a second. Ada couldn’t tell if he was just trying to remember or was connecting the dots inside his own head. “No, it was just him.”

“And without a single injury? Not even a scratch?”

“That’s not enough,” said Rollins.

Ada had to admit he was right. Pointing out or accusing Sousa right there in these docks held potentially disastrous repercussions. “Talk to him. Tell me if you don’t think something is off,” she said as she backed away towards the rest of the surviving crew, her eyes on Sousa.

Rollins glanced back at him and then nodded. “I’ll see what I can do.”

A tall Japanese man dressed in a Sanctuary Station maintenance uniform arrived just as Ada returned to her seat on the floor of the bay.

“Okay, my name is Hatori,” he said. He pointed to the women to his right and left. “This is Barbara and this is Maria. I guess we’re the ones in charge of asking you these questions, or tests, or whatever. So, let’s see

here,” Hatori had a paper-thin tablet in his hand, as did his colleagues. “First up is Tina Smothers. Tina Smother...”

A female crewmember next to Ada accidentally shoulder-bumped her as she answered her summons.

Ada barely noticed. She saw that Rollins, after pawning something off on a subordinate, had decided to approach Sousa. Her eyes were fixated.

“Lieutenant Sousa?” Rollins asked as he approached. Ada could just make out his lips.

As Rollins and Sousa talked, something else caught Ada’s attention. She heard a loud argument near the entrance to the docking bay. The argument turned into a little bit of a scuffle.

A single woman, head shaved bald, covered in unusual tattoos, was held back by two members of the docking bay crew. She yelled, writhed, and screamed, but Ada couldn’t make out what she was saying.

Ada never saw anyone look as intense as the bald woman being restrained. Veins popped out of her neck and forehead, her face red with rage. She looked crazed. Something was happening, and the private felt a rising sense of dread.

Suddenly, the woman changed in the blink of an eye. Ada didn’t see the bald, heavily-tattooed woman. She saw her friend. She saw Private Martin.

That’s not...this isn’t possible.

Almost as if in a dream, Ada found herself walking towards the commotion near the entrance, near where she saw Martin. Her legs seemingly moved on their own, giving her a floating sensation as she walked.

She’s dead. I saw her sucked out into space. There’s no way anyone can or could’ve survived that. Right?

But for some reason, Ada couldn’t stop moving. She couldn’t make her body understand. She *had* to go see her dead friend.

Ada was about halfway to the docking bay entrance when she heard and saw Martin scream to her: “Rejoice! It’s here! The Abyss!”

The words broke the spell. Suddenly, her dead friend’s visage was replaced by the bald woman’s face.

“Rejoice!” the woman screamed again. Then she disappeared in a loud explosion.

The suicide bomb was big enough to kill everyone in her immediate vicinity, including the two restraining her, but it was no bigger than a couple

of grenades. Certainly not as powerful as it could have been.

Naturally everyone in the docking bay was panicked. Ada knew something wasn't right. On instinct, she turned around to see what Sousa was doing.

With one snap swing of his arm, Sousa knocked Rollins out cold. Still smiling, he unholstered his pistol and opened fire on the crewmembers around him. Though his aim wasn't great, he was so close that he easily took out a half-dozen people with the first sweep of his arm.

Once the shock of the whole situation faded among the surviving crew of the *Atlas*, they fought back. Most were still armed, and all that could do so fired back at Sousa immediately, hitting him in seemingly every part of his body, from head to toe.

But he didn't go down.

Sousa first started to walk forward through the hail of gunfire. The older wounds closed up, his flesh and muscle moving like living liquid metal. His smile never faded, not even when super-heated bullets burst through his teeth. Both of his hands transformed. All ten fingers turned into something more akin to long talons.

Crewmembers were backing away now, still unloading on Sousa as they went. The action only seemed to make him move faster. Before long he was in the middle of the group, wildly slinging his hands, cutting and tearing through them. Blood flew everywhere as screams echoed throughout the docking bay.

Think fast, Ada. What can you use? What can you...there!

Knowing from experience and what was unfolding in front of her that guns didn't work on the enemy, Ada looked around for anything else. She just needed another option.

Sitting on top of a large cabinet-sized toolbox on wheels was what looked to be a large welding torch. Ada ran over to it and quickly tried to figure out how to operate the surprisingly complicated maintenance tool.

"Submit! Submit and know the joy of the dark!" yelled Sousa as he cut down men and women left and right, with no hesitation or anything resembling restraint.

How about the terror of the light!?

"Here!" screamed Royce, rushing up beside her and flipping a power bar on the side of the torch she'd never have known to use.

Ada ran up behind Sousa, torch in hand. She switched on the fuel and got ready to set the enemy ablaze.

Sousa spun around with lightning speed. He seemed to float over the ground as he cut the distance between them instantly.

Ada screamed out in pain as one of Sousa's talon-like fingers slid through the skin, muscle, and tendons of her shoulder with the utmost ease. She dropped the welding torch and grabbed the talon, tried to pull it out. It didn't budge.

Behind the creature, Rollins regained consciousness.

He stared dumbly for a moment around him, then up at Sousa. Ada screamed something at him. She couldn't say what. The pain of the talon was unbearable, like her entire upper torso was on fire, touched by flames of red-hot pain emanating from her split-open shoulder.

To his right, cowering under one of the maintenance racks, Rollins saw Royce. In the chief engineer's eyes, he saw true fear. That somehow angered him more than anything. He wasn't a soldier. He was a damn mechanic on a station. All he and his men had done was take in and try to help the *Atlas*, and look at what that had gotten them.

Rollins reached for his pistol with his only hand. It wasn't his good hand, so his aim was a little off at first. But he managed to hit and sever the talon that impaled Ada by her shoulder. He reloaded, then aimed for Sousa's head.

Freed from Sousa, Ada immediately picked up the welding torch. She struggled to lift the heavy tool with one arm, but had no choice. Sousa let out a horrible high-pitched screech and spun around to face Rollins.

Fueled by adrenaline, Ada manhandled the unwieldy torch into position and switched on the flame. "Burn, asshole!" she screamed. Without hesitation, she drove the tip into Sousa's back, setting his body alight.

Sousa let out more horrendous screeches as he thrashed around. The fire spread quickly—unnaturally so, Ada thought—and consumed his whole body in moments. Through the flames, Ada, Rollins, and everyone else in the docking bay watched him wildly change shapes and forms several times before falling down in a heap on the floor, still burning.

"I told you so," Ada said, before her legs buckled under her and she fell to her knees under the weight of the torch.

"Yes, you did," said Rollins as he ran over and pulled the still-lit torch off her shoulder. "I'm sorry I didn't believe you."

He stared at the open wound on her shoulder. "And I'm sorry for this."
He touched the flame to her skin.

Ada had never felt pain like it before. It was only a moment before the wound was cauterized and the bleeding stopped, but to her it seemed like eternity.

She passed out a second time.

THIRTY-SEVEN

LEE

SAITO, escorted by Washburn and members of the mayor's staff, entered the docking bay.

Immediately they were greeted by the sight of the exploded remains of the bomber. Sheriff Wei was with other members of the station police, examining the scene. He glanced up, then made his way over.

"What the hell happened here, Wei?" Washburn demanded. He was carefully stepping to avoid pieces of human beings.

Saito could see it was futile. There was just too much carnage here. He felt hollow inside.

"Suicide bomber, sir," answered Wei after taking the handkerchief away from his mouth and nose. He practically gagged.

Washburn's face turned even whiter as he turned to Saito in shock. "It must have been them."

"The cultists," Wei said, oblivious to Washburn's odd expression as he looked back at Saito. "The Oblivion people. Yes, we think so. I don't know for certain it's connected to what happened this morning, but it's a good bet there's something that ties them—"

"What happened this morning?" Saito demanded sharply.

Wei was thrown off by the newcomer's directness. "Uh, well, we had a disturbance with them. One was hurt pretty bad—"

"You knew this when we talked?" Saito said accusingly to Washburn.

"I can't just assume that—"

"Yet you did nothing," Saito said.

"What could I do?" Washburn said firmly. He turned to Wei. "How did the robots miss it?"

“Dunno. We’re still looking into how they even got access to the docking bay. After you ordered that the *Atlas* crew be segregated and confined there, we had guards posted on both sides of these doors.”

“Where are the guards?”

“We dunno that either. They’ve effectively disappeared. Even their HUDs have been deactivated.” Wei shrugged. “We’ve reestablished the quarantine, for what it’s worth.”

“Mayor,” Saito said, seeing the panic rising in his eyes, “you have to make an announcement—”

“Did you bring these things to us?” Washburn asked. “These creatures? Is this your doing?”

“I thought we got all of them.”

“You *thought*?”

“And if we didn’t, the quarantine was supposed to stop them. I couldn’t guess that you’d have agents on the inside working against you.”

Washburn knelt down and picked up a wallet belonging to one of the victims of the suicide bomb. Somehow it was still intact. He opened it up and saw an old-fashioned physical photo of a docking crew staff member with his wife and baby.

“How does this happen?” asked Washburn as he closed the blood-covered wallet.

Saito slipped passed him, further into the carnage. He watched as a sanctuary medic tried to help a man, a kid really, who held his own guts in where something sharp like a knife had eviscerated him.

“Sir?” Rollins arrived at Saito’s shoulder. He was accompanied by Ada and Baez, two of the few survivors of this latest attack.

“What happened here, Commander?” Saito asked, as he stared at the kid who screamed and cried as the medic worked on him.

“It was Sousa, sir. Well, not really. It was another of those damn things, sir. It attacked right after the bomb went off near the entrance.”

“Where’s...?” Saito pointed at the kid holding in his guts. “Somebody get this kid some help!”

Rollins glanced over. “The medics are helping him,” he said.

There were dozens of wounded. Saito knew it was unreasonable to focus on this one, but it seemed like the medic was doing nothing to help the boy’s pain. The look of anguish burned into Saito’s mind. It reminded him of his boy. Of Ben. The resemblance was uncanny.

“Somebody help him,” he reiterated, as if he hadn’t heard Rollins.

“Sir,” Rollins said, shaking his head. “Sir, they’re trying, but...” He shrugged and looked at his compatriots.

“He’s going to die, sir,” Ada said.

The words cut into Saito like it was his own belly being eviscerated now. “No, he can’t,” he whispered, picturing Ben. Not after he’d lost Bev. He couldn’t lose Ben, too.

“Sir? Sir!” Rollins tried to get Saito’s attention by shaking him.

“Lee!” snapped Ada.

Rollins, Baez, and anyone else nearby gave her a surprised look.

“I hear you,” Saito said, feeling his mind snap back into the present.

“Sir, it’s over here.” Rollins led Saito over to the remains of the creature who’d disguised itself as Sousa.

Saito looked down at something truly grotesque. “Sousa” consisted of a blackened, charred glob of bone, muscle, and twisted limbs. He counted what must’ve been five arms and at least as many legs sticking out from what looked like a pile of cooled tar.

“We still have no idea what it is. But what we do know is that it doesn’t like extreme heat,” explained Rollins. “The private here hit it with a powered torch tip.”

Saito looked up. “Humans don’t react well to that kind of heat.”

Ada winced and reached for her shoulder. “Yes, sir,” she said. “But this thing basically self-immolated on the spot in moments.”

“So it’s any extreme temperatures? That’s these things’ weakness?” Saito asked.

“Yes, sir,” Rollins said. “It appears so.”

“All we need to do is find more torches,” Saito said. “Or make some more. I want every member of our crew that’s left to be armed with one. Then we need to prepare defenses here.”

He turned around to find Washburn and that sheriff of his.

“Defenses, sir?” Ada asked. “Don’t we need to worry if there are any more of these things among us?”

“I want to,” Saito said. “But there’s no time.”

“What do you mean, sir?”

“I’ve seen this multiple times now. The play is always the same from them. The initial acts are always distractions.” He thought of the bombings in Annapolis. The attacks that had taken Bev. “All of this was a distraction.

First there's the suicide bomber, meant to draw people's attention away from the creature already among us. The thing pretending to be Sousa was just the tip of the spear, and another distraction as well. It keeps our attention away from...shit." Saito hurried back over to Mayor Washburn.

"How can I help you, Captain?" asked Washburn as he sat on a metal crate, rubbing his temples. He didn't look up. "How can I help anyone," he muttered.

"This isn't over, Mayor."

THIRTY-EIGHT

LEE

WASHBURN LOOKED UP SHARPLY. “What do you mean?”

“All of this,” Saito said, indicating the hanger. “All of it was just a distraction.”

“That so? What were they distracting us from? Goddamn civility? Not being murderous monsters?”

“What happened earlier, that your man the sheriff was talking about? With the cult this morning?”

Washburn shrugged. “There was some kind of riot. They were screaming about the Abyss coming. Rejoicing in it. They’re nuts, but harmless nuts. At least, until today.”

“Do you know where they are?”

“I know where their temple is, of course. The members are free to move about the station, as any other citizens.”

Saito felt the anger rising inside him. “But they *aren’t* any other citizens. You must see that now. You have to round them up this instant. Before it’s too late.”

He was sure that it was already too late, but they had to try.

But Washburn shook his head. “It doesn’t work like that. We’re a sanctuary station. We welcome everyone, no matter their race or religion.”

“Bullshit,” Saito said.

“Until an investigation is conducted, we can’t be sure—”

“You can be sure that they *are* a part of this. Those creatures might be our big problem. But those damn cultists are working with them.”

Washburn scoffed. “How’s that possible? You said they were monsters.”

“I don’t know,” Saito said. “But we shouldn’t wait to find out.”

“So what do you propose I do?” asked Washburn after a long sigh.

“Contain them,” Saito said. “Do you have a safe room? One that cuts off wireless signals, making their HUDs useless?”

“Out of the question. I’m not going to discriminate against any group on my station just because of what one of them did.”

“I don’t think you understand, Mr. Mayor. You don’t understand what’s happening here. This same thing happened to us, and look at our damn ship. Look how that all turned out. Remember the ships I told you about? The ones that attacked us on our way to Vassar-1?”

Washburn nodded, but said nothing.

“They’re distracting us from the real attack. It started with the suicide bomber. That was step one. They wanted to draw attention away from the secondary attack, the creature that tore apart my crew indiscriminately. Both were meant to draw our eyes away from the real threat, away from the bridge and the radars.”

“Away from the radar? Why would they want to—” Washburn paused suddenly.

Saito knew enough about HUD interactions to know he’d just seen something. “Message?”

Washburn nodded. “From the monitor team.” He turned to look Saito squarely in the eyes. “They see something out there.”

Washburn sighed, then tapped right above his eye. Instantly, the image in his HUD was broadcast outward. “Say that again, Sallers.”

The man in the image seemed to take a moment to adjust to the new view in his own HUD. “Uh, ships have arrived. Looks like AIC ships. A whole lot of AIC ships.”

Washburn frowned as he spoke. “Understood. If they try to make contact, let me know, and patch it in directly to my HUD. Until then, contact every member of our defense forces.” He paused, looking again intently at Saito. “Activate the Berthas,” he said.

“All of them?” Sallers asked.

“Every pulse cannon we got. Get ‘em up and targeting.”

“But sir, they haven’t fired yet.”

“They will,” Saito said.

“Just do it, Sallers,” Washburn said. “Mayor out.”

“Those might be AIC ships, but those aren’t AIC men in them,” Saito said firmly.

“I guess we’ll see,” Washburn said, then started coughing violently.

“What is it?” Saito asked as he watched Washburn wipe blood from his mouth.

“Some damn mutated form of cancer they can’t stop. Funny, I always thought it would be one of my ex-wives that would kill me.”

“How soon?”

Washburn shrugged. “Months, maybe.”

Saito grunted. “Well, no offense, Mayor, but I hope you die of that cancer.”

Washburn chuckled. “You’re a cheerful son of a bitch, you know that?”

“My wife says so,” Saito said. He grimaced. “Or did. She’s dead now.”

“Sorry,” he said. “I’m in between Mrs. Washburns myself.”

“No wife *and* dying of cancer?” Saito asked. “Living the dream.”

Washburn shrugged. “I guess I got all the breaks.” He nodded to a small group of *Atlas* crewmembers gathering at one side of the bay. “Do what you have to do down here, Captain. Take care of your crew, and I’ll take care of mine.”

“And the cultists?”

Washburn turned away without responding. “Sheriff,” he yelled out. “I need you to have your officers and those damn robots at every port of entry on the station. Prepare for a hostile boarding.”

“What’s happening, sir?” asked Wei.

“Nothing good,” he said.

Saito watched him go.

“Sir, your orders?” asked Rollins.

“Forget screening for more of those things. It doesn’t look like we have time. For right now, get to work finding anything that spits fire or can make things really cold in a hurry. Then we all need to find a place to hunker down. Try and recruit as many of the residents here on the station as possible, and do so quietly. That man, the mayor, he’s going to get a lot of them killed.”

“What about the dead?” Ada said.

“We have to leave them behind for now,” Saito said. “Right now we just need to do all we can to make sure that we don’t lose anyone else. Now get to work!”

THIRTY-NINE

ADA

ADA SPUN AROUND, knowing exactly who could help her. She found the chief engineer staring down at the charred black remains of the creature.

Royce looked down at the creature that had masqueraded as Sousa. “What was that thing?”

“I don’t really know, to be honest. Something terrible, something very dangerous and hard to kill.”

Royce stared at the still-smoking corpse. “Can you do me a favor?”

Ada hesitated. “I’ll do my best. What do you need?”

Royce looked up at her. “If...if I don’t survive this, I need someone to look after my cat. Her name is Spectre, and she’s all the family I have out here. Please, make sure she makes it out of here. Can you promise me you’ll try?”

“I...”

“Please.”

Ada had two cats of her own at home, so she could sympathize. Then again, it was an absurd request, under the circumstances, but it looked like Royce might be on the edge of hysteria. *Coping mechanisms come in all shapes and sizes*, she thought to herself.

“Sure,” she said as evenly as she could, knowing she needed the engineer’s help. “Where do you live?”

“Main block. Apartment 254. Here...” Royce put his finger up against his temple. “I unlocked it. Thank you. Really. Thank you.”

“No problem,” Ada said. She reached out and gently but firmly took Royce by the shoulder. “But hey, if you really want to thank me, can you help us out?”

Royce nodded. "Sure, but..." He hesitated, looking at the rifle slung over Ada's shoulder, then up at her face. "What can I do?"

"We need to find any weapon that emits either extreme heat or cold." Ada nodded back at the high-energy torch he'd helped her fire up earlier. "You knew how that thing worked. I'm guessing you know where we can find more of them, or anything like them. You know what I'm talking about?"

Royce's eyes seemed to light up. "I know exactly where we can find more," he said. "Come with me, quickly. Mayor Washburn is probably gonna call for me soon."

FORTY

WASH

“WHAT AM I LOOKING AT HERE?” asked Washburn. He stood in front of the viewing window. The monitor on the station wasn’t that different from the bridge of a starship.

Floating right outside the range of the sanctuary station’s cannons was a fleet of two dozen AIC fighters and two dreadnoughts. None of them made any move, or any indication that they were going to attack. They just floated there.

“We counted 25 smaller fighters and two Dreadnought-class warships, sir,” answered one of the station crew.

“Have they tried to communicate with us? Have they told us what they wanted?”

“No, sir. We tried to hail them, but got no response.”

Washburn felt a sense of menace from the AIC ships. Unlike Saito, he didn’t fear them, or for the safety of the people on his station. Mostly, he just hoped it’d be over quickly.

“Fire all cannons,” ordered Washburn.

Several crewmembers glanced at each other. Sallers spoke up. “Sir? You want us to fire on them? They haven’t fired on us.”

“They will.”

“They aren’t in range.”

“They will be. Fire!”

Washburn watched the fireworks show as his station’s defenses created a literal fireball in the distance where the AIC forces idled.

“Cease fire!” ordered Washburn. “Did we hit anything?”

“Not sure. Our weapons muddled the radars.”

A wave of AIC fighters flew through the fireball, directly towards the station. Washburn ordered his crew to shoot them down, but they were too many, too fast, and none of the station staff had ever really been in a fight.

Cannon after cannon was either shot out or had an AIC fighter kamikaze them out of commission. It wasn't long before the station was officially defenseless.

“Abandon the bridge. Go get your families and take any escape ship or pod off the station that you can find. Go *now!*” ordered Washburn. He yelled so loud he started to cough again, so hard it made him fall down to one knee.

When Washburn looked up, he saw that the fighters were changing their shape. Like globs of living liquid metal, they turned into something that looked more like railroad spikes instead of ships. Each of them flew extremely fast towards the station.

The spikes penetrated the shields and outside armor. Their initial impact broke the station's air-pressure seal, but also quickly plugged the holes. Whatever they were, the enemy didn't want to make the station inhospitable to life, not until they killed it themselves.

A single dreadnought emerged from the fireball. It seemingly headed straight towards the bridge, directly towards Washburn. Naturally he gave the ship the finger and started laughing.

“Come on, you big ugly bastard! You want this station? You're going to have to take it over my dead body!”

As if the AIC dreadnought heard Washburn, it fired a single torpedo.

FORTY-ONE

ADA

“HOW MUCH FURTHER, ROYCE?” asked Ada. She tried to keep her voice even and unhurried as they ran. She could hear Saito’s impatient steps behind her. Ada, Saito, Baez, Rollins, and the twenty-four remaining members of the *Atlas* crew followed the chief engineer through the halls of the station’s commercial level.

Royce swallowed, out of breath from the exertion, then said, “We need to get to the elevator just down here. Two floors directly down from it is the entrance to the maintenance armory. They keep welding torches, flares, and all sorts of things that might help fight whatever’s coming.”

Royce led the way as confused residents looked out from the shops, stores, and restaurants.

All these people, poor bastards have no idea what hell is coming for them. Why didn't Washburn evacuate them?

Ada looked back at the confused residents of the station with pity, but she also saw the determined face of Saito. She felt it, too. They needed weapons to fight the enemy, protect the crew, and hopefully be able to protect the residents as well.

Suddenly a large metal spike obliterated a hamburger spot, killing several people and blocking the way for the group. Briefly, the station lost air pressure and atmosphere, pulling residents and some of the group towards the spike, but that only lasted two seconds at most before everything was restored and evened out.

“Everyone run!” yelled Saito at the scared and shocked residents. “UEF soldiers! Prepare to fight!” Ada tightened her grip on the rifle in her hands, knowing how ineffective it was.

Part of the large metal spike rolled back, revealing the first look any human had of the creatures. It was hard putting their appearance into words. The best description Ada could come up with was that they were vaguely humanoid at times, almost insect-like at others, but they constantly shifted and changed shape. All of them looked metallic in their shine, but not in color. They were as black as the space outside.

“Fight!” yelled Saito before firing his own gun at the approaching shapeless creatures.

Only a couple of people around Ada had torches; most had guns like hers, which had already proven ineffective. They lost three crewmembers in the first thirty seconds. That didn’t count the dozens of innocent residents and bystanders that got cut down, stabbed and sliced by the shapeless creatures.

In the commotion and fighting, Ada had an idea. She saw that there was a liquor store nearby. “Baez! Come with me!”

“We getting out of here? Good idea,” said Baez.

“Not exactly.”

Baez bitched the whole way, but he followed Ada into the liquor store. They both took off their uniform shirts, revealing plain t-shirts underneath. As quickly as they could, they ripped off pieces of the uniforms and stuck them inside opened liquor bottles.

Armed with newly-made Molotov cocktails, Baez and Ada quickly lit and threw them at the shapeless creatures. As they screeched and burned, Saito ordered a retreat. They lost four more crewmembers before they got off the commercial level.

The whole station shook as Royce led them in the less direct, but only remaining, way to the elevator.

As soon as the doors closed, the shaking of the station intensified. The elevator stopped after only going down one floor. All the lights turned off, and the station’s red emergency lighting was activated.

“Shit!” yelled Baez. “Why ain’t this thing moving?”

“The station is on emergency lockdown,” Royce said. “We must’ve taken one hell of a hit. Give me a second, I’ll open the elevator doors manually.” He took out a hexagonal-shaped key and put it in the corresponding port on the elevator console. “We’ll be on the residential level, but we can take the ladder down one floor.”

Everything that happened next happened so fast, there was no time to think. As soon as the doors opened, a black blade flew through Royce's face and went out the back of his head. It nearly hit Ada, too, slicing past her shoulder before burying itself in the back of the elevator. Baez screamed and opened fire. Ada was blocked by the limp, falling body of Royce.

Instinctively, Saito snatched a welding torch from one of the crewmembers and ran forward, sticking the business end in the undulating mass of monster and opening the valve.

In its panicked death throes, the shapeless creature flailed its limbs, cutting Saito on his forehead; but thankfully, that was it. Within about thirty seconds, it was nothing more than a burning pile of tar.

Ada knelt down next to Royce's corpse. "Jesus..."

"We need to get out of here," said Saito. "We need to find someplace to hole up; then we'll make a go at the maintenance armory. Any suggestions?"

Ada looked at Royce's mangled face. "Yes," she whispered.

FORTY-TWO

LEE

SAITO STOOD PRESSED against a corner in the smoke-filled hallway on the Sanctuary-33 space station. Red emergency lights flashed as he checked his pistol, sliding out the magazine to make sure he had ammunition. Around him, the remains of his crew waited for him to make a move.

Saito took a deep breath, then peeked around the corner, warm blood streaming down his face from the gash on his forehead. All he saw was an empty space station corridor with apartment doors on both sides. More smoke bellowed out of the vents along the ceiling. Considering the amount, he determined the fire must've intensified.

Saito raised one arm, bent at the elbow at a ninety-degree angle. He made a fist, then changed it to an open hand, beckoning his crew to follow.

Pistol up at the ready, Saito quickly made his way around the corner and down the hall. He checked door numbers as he went. All the while, he kept checking behind them. Chances were very slim that the enemy wasn't following.

Saito saw the holographic projection of a padlock through his HUD. He beckoned Ada forward. Silently, she waved her hand in front of it, opening apartment 254. Relief washed over him, as the engineer had indeed unlocked and transferred access to his living quarters to Ada.

When Saito heard the high-pitched screeches echoing through the hall behind him, he knew they were running out of time. He needed to get the survivors inside as quickly as possible.

Saito covered the door as he waved everyone into the engineer's apartment. Despite knowing that the super-heated rounds in his pistol would

do little to nothing to stop the enemy, he kept his firearm trained in the direction of the screeches.

Saito squinted to try and focus his eyes as he saw a dark shape through the smoke at the end of the hall. It looked vaguely human, or something pretending to be human that hadn't quite learned how to walk. Using the walls to brace itself, the shape made its way towards him.

"Sir?" Saito felt a hand on his shoulder and glanced around to see Commander Rollins.

"Is this everyone?" asked Saito.

"I think so," answered Rollins. His pistol shook in his normally steady remaining hand.

Saito looked at his remaining crew. By his count there were only seventeen left. That was seventeen of the crew of over 2,000 the *UEF Atlas* had departed Annapolis with.

None of the survivors were untouched by the assault on Sanc-33. As a neutral space station in uncharted space, it was supposed to be as its name implied. But it turned out those rules only applied to humans.

Gunshot wounds needed to be mended, cuts and lacerations stitched, and burns treated. Unfortunately none of the medics had survived to that point, so in addition to being terrified and on the run, Saito's surviving crew was suffering and, in some cases, dying.

The engineer's apartment was modest. There was a couch for those most grievously injured. Others sat on the floor. Two Marines took a quick weapons inventory.

"Where's Washburn?" asked Rollins.

"He's worried about his own. He won't be coming," answered Saito.

"Dumb bastard is gonna go down with his station," said Baez as he paced back and forth in the small apartment.

"Calm down," ordered Saito.

"Calm down? Calm down!?" Baez got into Saito's face. They were so close their noses almost touched.

"Stand down, Private!" ordered Rollins.

"Nah, I don't think so." Baez briefly looked over at Rollins. Then he turned his attention back to Saito. "Look around you, 'Captain'. This is chaos, and in chaos, ranks don't mean shit no more. Your stars and bars ain't gonna save you, and they ain't gonna save us."

“Fighting among ourselves isn’t going to help either,” pointed out Ada. She tried her best to tend to a comrade who’d been nearly choked to death by the enemy.

“For all I know, some of you are one of them. Hell, for all you know, *I* am.” Baez pointed at Ada and then back at himself, burying his finger in his own chest. “So what’re we really doing here? Huh? Other than packing ourselves in tight so they can wipe us all out at once, or take us out from the inside. Huh?”

Saito calmly watched Baez break down. He didn’t judge him, not after everything he’d been through.

“I’m not waiting here to die!” Baez tried his hardest to fight back tears. “Good luck, all of you.” Before leaving, Baez turned back to Saito. “All of this is on you. On *you!*”

“Good luck, Private. I sincerely mean it.”

“Yeah, whatever, old man.” Baez checked his rifle and left. He walked out of the apartment into the smoke- and fire-filled hallways of the space station.

Saito felt something in the moment the hatch was open. There was a strange light streaming in from the hallway. The sound of the creatures was muted. He heard another voice that he couldn’t quite place.

“What do you want to do, Captain?” asked Rollins.

Saito slowly crossed the apartment towards the only window. Made of thick multilayered plastic, it kept the pressures and vacuum of space separate from the denizens of the station.

Saito placed his hand on the window, blood streaked in his fingers’ wake. Outside was the enemy: an enemy with no shape of its own, no identity. Their ships took the form of UEF fighters. They circled around a massive ball of living, shining metal.

Like a gaseous planet, the surface of the massive metal ball kept moving. Parts of it would spike out and twist, churn. Part of Saito found it hypnotic, almost beautiful. It was something shiny and precious against the cold dark abyss of open, uncharted space.

There was a loud bang at the apartment door. It made everyone jump except Saito. Another one followed, only louder than the first. He sighed and dropped his pistol on the carpeted floor. He felt the cut on his forehead throbbing. There were voices in his head now.

Saito didn't hear loud bangs on the door. He heard a light knocking and his dead wife's voice. She called to him.

"What're you...?" asked Rollins.

"This is it." Saito slowly made his way to the door, despite everyone begging him not to. He put his hand over the button to open it.

Ada gave Saito a look similar to an emotionally wounded and confused child. "Captain?"

"Rollins—Jake—do what I couldn't. Keep them safe." Saito's hand got closer to the door button. Before he pressed it, he asked: "One more favor?"

Rollins fought through his grief and shock. "Anything, sir."

"If you...*when* you make it out of here, get word to my son. To Ben. Tell him I'm sorry. I never should've left."

"Why don't you tell him yourself, sir? You don't have to do this," pleaded Ada. Then she frowned. He felt her eyes slide up to his forehead.

Saito could barely stand the throbbing that was coming from the cut now. The blood from it was seeping into his eyes, but he couldn't make himself blink.

He opened the door. "Thank you for being the most valiant crew I've ever had the honor of commanding. And please forgive me for failing you." It was like he was hearing someone else speaking. Someone reading a script.

With that, he stepped out into the hallway.

Much to his surprise, he wasn't greeted by the monstrous shapeless creatures that had annihilated his people. Instead, he was met with a lone woman at the opposite end of the hall. She didn't need to get closer for him to recognize her.

"Beverly?" Saito slowly walked towards his wife. She was draped in shadow. His mind told him it wasn't her. It screamed at him that it couldn't be her. But the other voices in his head, the ones that said it was her, were so loud.

Beverly held her arms out. "It's okay, Lee. It's all over."

He embraced her. "I'm sorry, Bev. I'm sorry I couldn't save you."

"Shhhh. Hush now, Lee. None of that matters. Not anymore, now that you're with me. It's beautiful, isn't it?" Beverly sounded like herself, but something was missing. Her voice was the same, but still sounded distant.

"You're the most beautiful thing I've ever seen," Saito said.

"No, silly. The Abyss. Can you see it yet?" she asked.

Saito felt only coldness. His vision narrowed to dark points.

“Can you see the simple beauty? We’re all equal here. We’re all the same in the dark. Can you see it yet? Isn’t it beautiful?”

Saito saw nothing. Nothing at all.

EPILOGUE

BEN WIPED a bead of sweat from his forehead. It was hot in the gunship. The fact that they were gliding past the Earth orbital blockade as wanted fugitives might have also had something to do with it.

“You still think your friend can get us past the blockade?” Ben asked. “They’ll be looking for us.”

Morgan looked calm. “Guess we’ll find out.”

“Just relax,” Ace said, looking even more nervous than Ben.

Leaving Earth was almost impossible without approval. And in their case, without being spotted. The shootout alone would make them wanted fugitives. But if what Morgan and Ace were saying was true, about the way the UEF had burned them after they’d discovered what was happening with the Oblivion, they might be the most wanted people on the planet.

Or off it.

“Cleared the inner loop,” Morgan said. She pushed the throttles forward, and the *Lost* responded by leaping forward. The little gunship was a struggle in atmosphere, but it was in its element here in space. “Two minutes and we’ll be far enough to fold jump,” she said.

Ben sat back, curious now. “That’s some contacts you have.”

“Yeah,” she said without looking away from the instruments. She wasn’t using the automatic beacons, but flying by manual control. Ben assumed that was because she was taking a different course than the computer would lay in, something that would let her “contacts” guide her clear of the outer loop. Not that they really needed it now. “A little too good, eh?”

“What the hell’s that supposed to mean?” Ace said.

But now Ben was leaning forward. Alarm bells were going off in his head. “They warned you about the attack,” he said. “Conveniently saving your lives.”

“I happen to like that convenience,” Ace said.

“Then they gave you a place to run to when you had the data,” Ben said, ignoring Ace.

Morgan nodded. “Pretty damn convenient.”

“It’s a trap,” Ben said.

“Look who’s getting all paranoid on us.”

“I was always paranoid,” Ben said. “It doesn’t mean I’m wrong.”

“No, it doesn’t,” Morgan said. “No it doesn’t.”

“Wait,” Ace said. “What’s going on here? You said we could trust them.”

“You heard what you wanted to hear,” Morgan said. “I told you that they work with my father’s brother,” she said. “I told you they were smugglers and thieves. I told you that *I* didn’t trust them.”

“You said they had an army that could help us,” Ace said, voice rising. “You said they could pull everything from the neutrals we grabbed without alerting the UEF network.”

“They aren’t the only people in the known universe that can do that,” Ben said.

“So what are we saying here?” Ace asked.

The comm link clicked alive as the *Lost* passed the outer loop of the blockade. “Clear to proceed,” said a mechanized voice.

Morgan looked over at Ben. “It means we need a new place to go.”

“Look,” Ace said. “I might hear what I want to hear, but it sounds like your people are the kind of people to hold a grudge for a favor not returned, if you know what I mean.” He paused. “They’ll come looking for us.”

“No doubt,” Morgan said. “But so will the UEF. *You* know it’s true,” she said pointedly to Ace. “After what they did to those Marines? They’re soon going to know what we have, and they’re going to come for it.”

Ace sat back angrily. “Great. Just great! So now we got the entire universe after us? We were counting on your friends being a safe harbor. Now they’re after us. The UEF is after us. We’re out here with our asses hanging out, with nowhere to go.”

“We have somewhere we could go,” Ben said quietly.

He looked at Ace, then at Morgan, wondering if either of them would guess what he was about to say. “We can go find the *Atlas*.”

“Those coordinates are classified,” Morgan said.

Ben hesitated. “I might have looked up a few other things while I had classified access.” He paused. “Things that would get me flagged, and that I wouldn’t go near if I didn’t know I was leaving the planet and never coming back.”

“Damn, son,” Ace said. “Ballsy. But I still don’t see why we’re going after the *Atlas*.”

Because my father is still alive. I know it.

“Because if they really were sabotaged by the Oblivion and attacked by their alien friends, they might be the only people in the UEF that would actually believe us.”

“If any of them are alive. Didn’t you see what those shapeshifters can do?” Ace asked.

Ben raised his prosthetic arm. “Yeah, I know what they can do.”

“I just think it’s risky.”

“Where would you rather go?” Morgan asked.

Ace sat back, unhappy. “I don’t know, man. I don’t know.”

“Then that’s as good as anywhere,” Morgan said. She spun the computer input panel toward Ben while she initiated the fold sequence. He entered the coordinates.

Ben put on his mag bracelets. Morgan and Ace did the same.

Ace was right about one thing. People would be looking for them. They needed to move fast.

“Ready for this, boys and girls?” Morgan asked.

“Yes,” Ben said.

“No,” Ace said.

Morgan nodded. “Initiating fold.”

BOOK 2: FIRST CONTACT

PROLOGUE

AHMED DAVIS WOKE up as the twin suns poured light through the port window of his cramped quarters. If he had a choice, he'd get a few more hours in bed, but he was on watch today. Besides, he never had a choice. Not anymore.

One might think that after three years of living on Magellan 5, he'd be used to the rotating shifts, but he wasn't. He'd been an artist once, and he'd liked that life. Waking when he wanted. Sleeping when he wanted. Doing anything when he wanted. It was glorious.

That ended the day he downed six Bliss Sticks and decided to fly his old junk hauler home. He smashed into a family headed home from their oldest daughter's wedding. One boy was killed, one girl crippled. Ahmed had almost died, too. When he woke from his coma, he was sentenced to a convict crew on the farming world Magellan 5.

For the past thousand and ninety-five cycles, he'd wished he was dead. He had another thousand left to feel the same way.

Ahmed groaned as he stood up and stretched out. His uncomfortable cot did wonders for his already suspect back. Doctors had urged him to take painkillers and anti-inflammatories. He took the latter, but he swore he'd stay sober after the crash that had gotten him sentenced to this terrible planet. So he suffered in more ways than one as he stumbled across the long communal worker house to the bathrooms at the far end.

Though it was pretty early in the morning and the window shutters were still closed, Ahmed wasn't the only colonist stirring at that hour. Those chosen for the day's first shift were already on break. He could see them eating under their bed lamp lights, covered in the dirt and dust of the planet

outside. Kitchen workers sat on the edges of their beds, putting on their white uniforms and black work boots.

Ahmed returned to his bunk and touched the wall sensor to reveal two small drawers. In one were his clothes and guard uniform. In the other was his safety gear: boots, gloves, goggles, and a scarf, all to protect his exposed skin from Magellan 5's sandpaper-like high winds.

"HUD, play *Jupiter* by Gustav Holst," ordered Ahmed. A second later, the orchestral music started to play in his head. "HUD, volume four."

Ahmed made his way to the hall that led out of the communal workhouse. Enclosed, protected from the elements by little more than half-inch-thick super-glass, he looked outside to see what weather awaited him today.

The same as every day, dipshit. It was dry, dusty, and windy out. But storm clouds, layered on top of each other, loomed overhead. Maybe he'd get lucky and some acid rain would break the monotony.

The cafeteria was a little livelier than the workhouse. Ahmed joined the long line of Magellan 5 colonists, trays in hand, waiting for their turn to be served mediocre food.

Ahmed was impatient. Part of it came from his overall frustration with his current life, but the other part came from the fact he could see the time through his HUD. He was running late.

Rua's going to be pissed.

"Eggs, bacon, and buttered toast. White bread." Ahmed pointed at the food he wanted. A tired-looking cafeteria worker half-heartedly scooped up some cold, flavorless artificial eggs, plopped down some disturbingly flexible mystery-meat bacon, and tossed on a couple of slices of old, stale toast.

Breakfast was served.

As he ate, Ahmed watched the UEF News One feed through his HUD. Nothing new. There were no developments on the biggest story as of late, the disappearance of the *Atlas* and her crew. Pundits came on and theorized about the ship's possible fate. Mechanical or electrical fault, followed closely by an AIC attack, seemed to be the leading contenders. But with something like this, the utterly absurd was never far away. One pundit was sure it was a preplanned alien attack, and another claimed to have evidence of a massive space whale that swallowed it. That the news feed gave equal time to all the crazy theories was proof enough of the story's popularity.

The cheap artificial food in Ahmed's stomach felt unsettled as he hurried out the cafeteria towards the main complex airlock. It was the first step towards going outside and walking to his post. He entered the first lock, the so-called suit up room, with little hesitation. He was very late now.

As a guard, Ahmed had Level 2 clearance. That meant he could access weapons in the suit-up room, squared away in lockers against one wall. All it took was a wave of his hand and he could arm up with a light metal dragon-weave vest and a standard-issue UEF Mark 4 pulse rifle.

Ahmed slung the rifle over his shoulder as he threw a couple of mags of superheated rounds into the cargo pockets on his pants. Right by the exit of the suit-up room was a row of breathers, meant to filter out the dust and dirt of the Magellan 5 surface. They also provided extra oxygen, making it easier to breathe. Having been here three years already, Ahmed was well past the point where he needed one. Still, he grabbed one and stowed it away in one of his many pockets.

Workers came in from an auxiliary room and dropped off their gear. Some of them, newbies on the planet, coughed up blood, dirt, and grime. Ahmed remembered those days about as fondly as he remembered all the days since.

The auxiliary room didn't really apply to people leaving the building complex. It was for those who wanted to remove their equipment and gear and take a disinfectant shower. Most got cleaned coming in through the initial lock, but those who worked sewage or in the pits, they needed a bit of a deeper clean. A tall metal wall divided the exit and entrance sides, and Ahmed paid no attention to the steam spilling out over it.

Lastly, the decontamination room would've been the first that those coming in from the planet's surface would enter through. On their side, they were immediately disinfected via high-intensity radiation. The white coats claimed that it was just hot and bright enough to kill alien bacteria and viruses, but most workers didn't believe it. Ahmed certainly didn't.

He pressed the exit button at the far end of the final room. Lights around the airlock door went from red to yellow, then to green. With the green light came a loud buzzing sound as the door slowly opened. He put on his goggles, and pulled up his scarf over his nose and the bottom half of his face.

Immediately Ahmed got blasted in the face with high winds and burnt-orange dust. Undaunted, he casually walked out onto the Magellan 5

surface.

Despite the suns above and the brightness filtered through clouds of dust, it was cold on the planet's surface. It was always cold.

The outer perimeter, a dome made of specialized energy, kept the atmosphere in the colony breathable, albeit not at Earth standards. But it did little to keep the elements or even alien life out, the latter of which concerned Ahmed.

Ahmed's job was to enter his assigned watchtower and stand sentinel over a vast section of the outer perimeter. What was he looking for? His primary concern was alien life.

Magellan 5 wasn't as barren as it first appeared. In the mountains beyond the colony were fierce, armored predatory creatures they known as sun wolves, who regularly tried to infiltrate the colony and steal food and workers. Then there was the ever-present threat of an AIC invasion. After all, they were still at war, and close to the enemies' swath of space.

This was, of course, a job that a drone could do. But because of the difficult conditions on the planet's surface, it would require high-end drones and frequent, expensive maintenance. Forced labor of the variety that Ahmed and his fellow convicts could provide was so much more abundant.

On his way to his watchtower, Ahmed passed farms housed in physical domes. There were thousands of them. Magellan 5 was chosen to colonize because of how fertile the land beneath the dust was. Just a little water and it became extremely productive, at least agriculturally. The farms of Magellan 5 fed, either directly or indirectly, the colonies on over a thousand worlds.

Ahmed pressed a button on his uniform sleeve. A digitally-projected stopwatch appeared across his forearm. The countdown to the end of his shift had begun.

Ahmed climbed a rickety ladder to the top of the watchtower. Each ascended rung made a hollow creaking noise that almost echoed above the sounds of the wind. He didn't pay attention. He just kept listening to his orchestral music.

"Dammit, Ahmed. It's about time!" yelled Rua Chozaki, her arms rising in exasperation. She left the small semi-enclosed pod at the end and walked across the grated metal walkway towards him.

"Sorry, Rua. Cafeteria was crazy," Ahmed said.

“Because of you, I got less time before I gotta come back up here and stare at this shithole again,” she thundered as she squeezed her way past him to the ladder. “I hope your shift sucks.”

Ahmed watched her struggle to keep the rifle slung around her shoulders as she descended the ladder. He wondered absently how someone so small could generate so much anger.

HOW LONG HAS IT BEEN? Three hours? Four?

Ahmed looked down at the counter on his forearm. Not even two hours.

Ahmed slumped in the lone chair in the semi-enclosed pod at the top of the watchtower. From here he could look out over a gigantic canyon that was beyond grand. Around it was barren wastes, for as far as his eyes could see. In the distance he saw the glowing, transparent sky-blue outer perimeter, and the stations that maintained it in that section. His back ached.

“All you gotta do is climb out,” said Ahmed aloud to himself. He stared down from the small perimeter wall that encircled the watchtower. It would be trivial to climb over. He knew that because he’d done it. He’d never jumped, but he’d climbed over it, just to see how hard it would be.

It was twenty stories down to the planet’s surface. There was no way he’d survive the fall, not if he dove headfirst. He knew he wouldn’t do it. He was chickenshit. But it was still fun to dream.

“And then all this will be over,” he said to himself. “And then I’ll be one with the Abyss.”

Ahmed had recently gotten interested in a new religion. Life was so boring on Magellan 5 that he was always looking for something, anything to stimulate his mind. Then along came a handful of missionaries. They’d tried their luck with the colonists, but ever since a mob had attacked them, they’d been living in the convict quarters with Ahmed and the rest of the guards. Most people called them a cult, but Ahmed was more open-minded than that. The Oblivion religion had plenty of aspects that intrigued him.

The Oblivion were adamant in their beliefs, that was true, but he found that conviction compelling. Basically, they welcomed one of two forms of unity. Either they believed in unity through death, which they described as the Abyss, a quasi-spiritual vacuum of space that was unknowable by

definition; or they believed in the coming of gods from another dimension, which would unite humanity. Either way, there would be no hate, no violence, no war, no hunger, no thirst, and a purpose for every person. It was too simplistic to take seriously, Ahmed told himself. He was toying with the idea more than anything, but he still found himself strangely drawn to it.

“HUD, display The Tomb of the Abyss, where I left off”. Ahmed ordered his HUD to bring up a digital version of the Oblivion’s quasi-spiritual text. Everything about the group was quasi-something, mostly because they seemed to refuse to ascribe concrete definitions to anything, no matter how blatant they appeared to Ahmed.

And yet he wanted to learn more.

He sat down on the little bench in the watchtower and got to reading.

As a part of his job as a guard, Ahmed’s HUD was directly plugged into Magellan 5’s security system. An alarm popped up. He opened it, if for no other reason than to just get it out of the way. In his three years on the planet, he’d never seen a real incursion into the colony. Most were just small Sun Wolves that were easily picked off from his or other towers.

“Mother, this is tower zero-three-six”. Ahmed tried to hail the communications room back at the main administration building on Magellan 5. He had to inform them of any trespassers past the outer perimeter, even if it was just something minor.

“Zero-three-six, this is mother,” answered a woman’s voice on the other line of Ahmed’s HUD.

“Yeah, so it looks like we have a perimeter breach at section fifteen, at the canyon.”

“Can you see what it is?” asked the woman from home base.

“Nobody else has called it in?” Ahmed asked.

“Negative.”

Damn. Ahmed would have to actually do something. “Hold on,” he sighed, getting to his feet. “Let me take another look. There’s a dust storm moving in, so it might be a little hard.”

Ahmed looked out towards the outer perimeter, which was engulfed by the approaching dust storm. The storm made it nearly impossible to see anything, but he still needed to try. At the very least, it was something to break the monotony.

Ahmed used a pair of dust-covered digital binoculars that were already in the watchtower pod. He wiped off the lenses and took a peek. At first he saw nothing. The undulating clouds of the dust storm covered everything. Then something caught his eyes.

“Not sure what it is yet,” he said, aware that he wasn’t supposed to be having a casual conversation over the hot connection, but not really caring, either. “I don’t see any Sun Wolves or...”

What in the hell is that?

Ahmed saw a ball of bright light moving rapidly through the dust storm. It looked to originate in mid-air, and screamed down towards the ground. He barely had enough time to finish his thought when the bright ball of light hit something and caused a massive explosion. And that was followed by another, and another.

Explosions erupted one after the other, all along a line. At first, Ahmed had no idea what they were.

Then it hit him.

“Mother, the generators!” Ahmed said, too shocked to form thoughts. “Something is blowing up the generators and the power stations for the outer perimeter wall!”

There was nothing but static in his HUD. “Mother!” Ahmed shouted. “Do you read me?”

Everything happened so fast, it was hard for Ahmed to even form a thought. The outer perimeter went down in the blink of an eye. Instantly, the atmospheric seal around the Magellan 5 colony disappeared. Everyone outside in the colony proper found themselves subject to a sudden change of gravity and shift in air pressure.

Guards and other colonists flew up several feet into the air. Ahmed himself was only stopped by the top of the watchtower pod. Seconds later the emergency protocols were initiated, and power was rerouted through the inner perimeter system. Air pressure was regained, and the integrity of the colony’s atmosphere was restored, albeit more diffusely than was comfortable. Breathing was instantly harder. Everyone who’d floated up in the air was dropped just as suddenly and violently as they’d been lifted.

Ahmed landed face-first on the pod floor, barely missing the bench that could have easily snapped his neck. He might have been knocked out for a brief second. He couldn’t be sure.

Dazed and confused, Ahmed lifted himself up off the pod floor. He picked up his rifle and took a look out from his post to see what the hell had just hit them. The colony's emergency sirens blared so loud they made his ears ring.

Out of the clouds of the dust storm emerged a dozen or so AIC fighters. They zipped by over Ahmed's post and into the colony, opening fire with their guns and missiles. He swung around and looked on helplessly as several domed farms and their workers disappeared in explosions. Some colonists tried to run for what they must have thought was cover inside the main buildings, but were only gunned down by the agile fighters.

It was a massacre.

Ahmed tried shooting at the ships as they got close, but he had no effect. There was no way he'd be able to hit them, and even if he did, a pulse rifle wouldn't do much damage. But it was all he could do not to feel helpless. Then he heard a deep rumbling sound coming from the canyon. He could feel a vibration in his pod.

Ahmed had seen dreadnoughts in space before. They were often on display in military formations on the news feeds. But he'd never seen one this close before.

At first, it was just a massive black shape lingering in the dust storm. Then it emerged, like something out of a nightmare. As it flew over Ahmed, it was so close he could feel the heat from the hull. He could see the gears moving the on-board cannons, aiming them towards the colony. His ear drums burst from the concussive sound of them firing.

Ahmed dropped his rifle and just watched the colony go up in flames. He knew that he'd never see home again. He'd never see his family or friends. All he hoped was that it would end quickly.

One of the cannons shifted and aimed directly at him. He closed his eyes as heat poured over him.

ONE

IMMEDIATELY UPON COMPLETING their fold jump, the *Lost's* proximity alarms blared.

"That's not good," Ben said.

"You think?" Morgan snapped. She saw what looked like a fighter ship barreling straight towards them.

"Uh—" Ace said, leaning forward helpfully.

"I see it," Morgan said through gritted teeth. She realized the fighter was dead in space. It started to tumble end over end, badly blasted and scorched, but nonetheless coming straight toward them.

Morgan banked hard to the left. The debris barely scraped the hull, but the responsive gunship just about avoided disaster—for the moment.

"What the hell happened here?" Ace asked the question they were all thinking.

The *Lost* had come out of the fold jump into the remains of a space battle. The shattered, broken carcasses of spaceships were all around them, forming a thick, impenetrable minefield.

"We ain't going through this soup," Ben said.

Morgan glanced over at him. There was something about the way he said it that bothered her.

"We're fine," Morgan said stubbornly.

"Fine?" Ace said incredulously. "You're a good pilot, Morgan, but you ain't that good. We need to put on our shields and gently float our way outta —"

Before Ace could finish, he was thrown out of his chair by a swift barrel roll.

Morgan couldn't help it. She needed this. She could feel her skills rusting planetside. Besides, she needed to test the *Lost*.

And if she was being honest, it was fun as hell to see the look on the boys' faces.

She cut hard the other way, flying too close to a large chunk of debris just for the hell of it.

"Dammit, that was too close, Morgan!" Ace shouted.

She laughed as she glanced back at Ace. Then she got a look at Ben. He wasn't smiling. He didn't look scared anymore. He was just eying up the ship debris. She felt like she could read his mind.

Ben had known the *Atlas* was flying into a trap. They all had. But being witness to the results was a different prospect altogether. She could almost see the wheels turning in his mind. Was his father out here somewhere in a cold, dark grave? Or had he survived and escaped this? Had anyone?

Morgan easily shifted the *Lost*'s thruster power, moving in and out of large debris while letting the shields take care of anything smaller than fist-sized.

"Shut down the engine and kill the power!" ordered Ben.

"What is it?" Ace asked.

"If we shut down the engines, I can't steer this hunk of shit," Morgan said. She was actually growing fond of the *Lost*, but admitting that was bad luck; any pilot knew that. "And if I can't steer, we don't avoid debris. And if we don't avoid the debris, well, use your imagination."

"We've got bigger problems," Ben said, nodding at an energy signature that Morgan had missed in her focus on dead debris.

It wasn't dead. It was very much under power.

"An AIC salvage ship," Ace said.

"Shit," she hissed as she dropped the *Lost* to a crawl.

"Power down," Ben said.

"I am," Morgan snapped. "We can't just kill it like that. I have to run a reduction cycle."

"They're gonna spot us," Ace said. "We power down and we got no weapons."

"They're not gonna spot us," Ben said.

Morgan thought Ben sounded awfully sure of himself for someone who didn't know a thing about the gunship they were flying in. He might know space, but he'd been on a supercarrier most of his life. The *Lost* was a

gunship. She wasn't fast enough or well-armed enough for a real fight. Plus, both the AIC and UEF had pretty strict rules against pirates, raiders, and salvagers.

"Let's hope we don't have to find out," Morgan said as she killed the last power cell. "We're powered down. It'll take at least thirty seconds to re-spool."

"So we just sit here and hope?" Ace sounded disgusted.

"Yup."

"Screw this. I'd rather run."

"You'd rather die," Morgan said.

"Better than this cowering bullshit."

"Can you two not bicker like an old couple about anything?" Ben asked, his voice a whisper.

"You don't have to whisper," Ace said sarcastically. "They can't hear you."

"It can't hurt," Ben hissed back.

A red exclamation mark suddenly dominated the *Lost's* viewing window.

"Shit," Morgan said. "Someone's trying to hail us."

"You screwed us," Ace snapped.

Morgan had to fight the urge to punch him, then wondered why she'd fought it in the first place.

"Don't panic," Ben said, sounding decidedly less than totally chill himself.

"Don't panic?" Ace said, sounding like he was already well into panic mode. "Do you not see the remnants of a lot of ships bigger than this one around you?"

"Morgan, answer the call," Ben said. He leaned forward in the captain's chair. Whether he'd been in a ship like this or not, he knew that the mirrored transmission would be of him in that chair.

"Here goes nothing," Morgan said, flipping the comm line to engage the incoming message.

A video call opened up on the ship's main viewing window. In it was a female AIC officer with sharp features to match her dark complexion. Curly black hair was held tight under the three-point hat that matched the brown AIC uniform. She was a fleet captain, if Morgan knew anything about the stars on her uniform, and she looked serious, all business.

“How can we help you, Captain?” Ben asked, sounding rather formal to Morgan’s ear. Then again, she had no idea how anyone talked out here. What time she’d had flying these buckets previously had been commercial. Ace had the dropship experience with the Marines before he’d become a cop like Morgan, but he hadn’t done it out here in deep space. Only Ben had spent any time out here.

“I’m Captain Renny LeFleur with the 78th Fleet of the Alliance of Independent Colonies. Identify yourself, yah,” ordered LeFleur. She had the halting speech and mannerisms that Ben had long identified with the AIC; the ‘yah’ in particular was a common interjection. He knew off-worlders who didn’t use it, but most did.

“My name is Ben Sanders, and this is our ship, the *Swan*,” Ben said.

“This is AIC space,” LeFleur said. “State your business here.”

Morgan glanced back at Ben. AIC space? This was neutral space, the last she’d heard. The *Atlas* wouldn’t have jumped into AIC space directly. It seemed the AIC was expanding.

Or maybe this was another game that the powers played out here on the fringes. Ben seemed to take her pronouncement in stride.

“We’re privateers,” Ben said. “On our way to Vassar-1.”

Technically it was in the ballpark of truth. Morgan’s father had always said the best lies had a sliver of truth. Then again, she had a complicated relationship with her father. Before this was all over, she was going to have to tell everyone the truth about him.

But not yet.

“Mercenaries, yah? Why are you going to Vassar-1? What business do you have there?”

“We’re looking for work. Word around the neural net is that you guys are looking for some hired hands to carry on the good fight against the Terrans.”

He’d pushed it too far. Morgan could see it instantly in the face of the woman on the other side of the conversation.

“If you were indeed looking for work, you’d know that you need to go to one of our military outposts to sign up and get assigned. Considering the fact that you don’t know that and look to be scrapers and salvagers, you are under arrest. We’ll find out the truth once you’re aboard our ship. Prepare to be boarded.”

LeFleur quickly ended the video call. Ben sat back, rubbing his chin.

“Good job, asshole,” Ace said. “Now we get see the inside of a prison. An AIC prison. I can’t believe I vouched for you.”

Ace had been petrified of going it alone with Morgan; she knew that. Under his bluster, he was frightened out of his mind. He’d grabbed hold of Ben like a security blanket.

Morgan wasn’t about to give him a free pass. “Ace, do you ever shut up?”

“Weapons,” Ace said, ignoring her and beginning to rummage around the rear cabin. “We need weapons.”

“What’s the plan?” Morgan asked Ben once Ace was in back.

Ben frowned. “Can you charge up the engines and the forward cannons without them knowing?”

“Engines, yes. We’re tiny compared to what they’re built for out here, so they won’t necessarily register it. But cannons, no. They’ll be looking for weapons systems.”

“Once engines are up, though, you can charge the cannon fast, right?”

Morgan thought about it. “Once we’re over fifty percent, I suppose that’s true,” she said. “We can fire a bolt or two while we charge the rest of the way.”

Ben nodded. “We’ll only need a bolt or two.”

“What are you thinking?”

“Get engines up as close to fifty percent as you can,” Ben said. “Do it at your discretion, but don’t wait too long. I want a surprise engine burst waiting for them when they try and link the docking tunnel.”

Morgan whistled. “It’s chancy. If we break the coupling...” She let the implication hang in the air.

Ben’s features hardened. “Those guys aren’t setting foot on this ship.”

TWO

THE AIC SALVAGE ship approached the *Lost* from the front.

“That can’t be what that captain’s on,” Ben said, which meant there was something else out here. A dreadnought, certainly. Possibly more. Maybe lots more.

The AIC didn’t want for firepower. For all he knew, there was an armada just outside the debris field that they hadn’t even stumbled upon yet.

“Half-power,” Morgan whispered. “I don’t want to cycle much higher with them this close.”

“Is that enough?”

“Against that? Sure.”

“And against more?”

“If we start shooting, I’ll start cycling to full power without limits. From fifty percent, we can get to a hundred in a few seconds.”

Ben had a feeling there was something she wasn’t telling him, but he could live with that. She knew what she was doing with the ship far better than he did.

Ben had spent his life on destroyers. His instinct here was to shoot first and ask questions later, which meant that was the instinct of the AIC officer he’d been speaking with earlier, for sure.

“More company,” Morgan said, pointing at her instruments. “Two AIC fighters coming up from behind.”

“Flanking us,” Ben said. “That means the welcome party’s coming.”

On cue, a boarding vessel began a slow approach from behind. The boarding vessel was lightly armed on the outside; it was a glorified tin can.

But what it lacked in external firepower, Ben knew, was more than made up for by what was inside. He expected that a full squadron of Marines, armed to the teeth, would come flooding into the ship the instant the dock link was secure.

“This is some bullshit,” Ace said anxiously. His search for more weapons must have come up empty, because he simply kept grabbing the handle of his pistol, then releasing and grabbing it again, over and over.

“Just wait. We need to time this right.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Ace said.

After a few seconds that seemed like an eternity, Ben felt and heard the jarring sound of another ship docking with them.

Ben spun around to Morgan. Her hands were already dancing over her controls, anticipating the maneuver.

“Wait,” Ben said.

Morgan poised over her control board.

“Wait,” Ben said.

“What the hell are we waiting for?” Ace hissed.

Then Ben heard it. The inner door chamber opened.

“Now,” he snapped. They had one chance. They had to hit the boarding ship while her door was open but the *Lost’s* wasn’t.

Morgan goosed the thrusters. Even at half-power, they easily ripped the link to the docking ship open. Gas instantly vented out into space and the ship careened wildly away, slamming into one of the two fighters floating in tight formation with it.

“Firing,” Morgan said as she unloaded several hundred high-speed pulse rounds from the *Lost’s* front cannons. Even if the plasma cannons were at full charge, they’d likely not have been able to penetrate the salvage ship’s shields, but they didn’t have to. They just needed to surprise them long enough to get past them.

“Powering to full,” Morgan said. “Hang on!”

The *Lost* jumped forward as her thrusters exploded to life. No more half-power now; they were wide open. The remaining fighter behind them was caught in the wash and tumbled away. Morgan leaned hard on the thrusters, but there was still the loud sound of metal on metal as the gunship smashed past the salvager.

“That hurt!” Ace shouted.

“Them more than us,” Morgan said, although Ben wasn’t sure how she could know that. Running into things in space was generally bad for everyone involved.

“Full power,” Morgan said. “We’ve got company.”

The fighter that had initially been kicked away was now in pursuit. The second fighter, still further back, was also coming around.

“Can you lose them?” Ben asked.

“That’s the idea,” Morgan said. She turned the *Lost* and dove for the densest part of the debris field.

“Ace, get to the back of the ship and man those pulse cannons,” Ben snapped. “Clean our ass off.”

“With pleasure,” Ace said, jumping out of his seat and sounding genuinely relieved. He might have actually skipped as he ran. Even if this were life or death, just the fact that he’d be shooting at something seemed to put the man at ease.

Ben’s attention was split between the readings in front of him, which reflected the data on Morgan’s screen, and the gunship’s viewing screen.

“This is thick,” Ben said. “We can’t go full speed in here.”

Morgan’s shoulders seemed to tighten. “Shouldn’t be a problem, boss,” she said.

Did she think he was making some kind of judgment about her flying? Before he could disavow her of that view, Morgan said, “This might get bumpy.”

The view through the forward viewscreen spun around so fast that Ben felt dizzy. A moment later, Morgan started a series of extreme maneuvers that Ben was sure would make even the most seasoned fighter pilot lose his lunch. She laughed the whole way.

Ben held back his nausea and held tight to the armrests of the captain’s chair. High-energy plasma rounds flew past, no doubt from the fighters that were in pursuit. In theory, they were more maneuverable than the *Lost* could ever hope to be, but with Morgan at the controls, Ben wasn’t so sure of that.

A chunk of debris was hit by some of the plasma fire, and exploded in front of the *Lost*. Morgan grunted and compensated instantly, but there was still an alarming amount of jostling as the larger pieces slammed into the hull plating.

The deeper they flew into the debris field, the more of it was disturbed in the pursuit, creating a chain reaction of debris impacts that made the going very hard. Finally it seemed even Morgan and her ego had had enough.

“As fun as this is, we can’t keep this up too much longer,” she advised. Her artificial eyes moved much more quickly than a natural pair, helping her navigate the debris field and make split-second decisions and moves. An alarm blared to life on her board, and she silenced it, but not before Ben saw that they were facing structural damage to the hull.

“HUD, call Ace,” Ben said.

“Whaddaya want? I’m kinda busy,” Ace replied.

“How’s it coming back there with putting holes in the things chasing us?”

“I’m working on it!” Ace shouted over the sound of the rear cannons firing. “These things are just a little bit nimbler than what I’m firing.”

“We need you to take at least one of those bastards out,” Ben said calmly.

“What do you think I’m trying to do?” Ace exploded. “Hold hands and sing together?”

“Stop going for kill shots and clip their engines,” Ben said. “Those are old AIC designs. Made for atmospheric and space flight.”

“So?” Ace demanded.

“So they have outboard thrusters. Clip the wings.”

Ace paused. “I knew that,” he said at last.

“Sure you did,” Ben said. “Just reminding you. End call.”

Ben returned his attention to the forward viewscreen just as Morgan said, “What the hell is that?”

THREE

MORGAN HAD SEEN a lot of big ships in her day. She might have been grounded on Earth for the past few years, but in her youth, on the long haulers her mother used to fly, she saw some of the biggest ships in the universe. There was a rhyme and a reason to way things were constructed on a spaceship, no matter what their make or model, home port, or final duty was.

That youthful knowledge was the only reason she was sure what she was seeing in front of her was part of a spaceship. Because otherwise, based on the sheer size, she honestly would have guessed that it was the remnants of a space station.

“What the hell are we looking at?” she asked.

Ben had stood up from the command chair and drifted forward, seemingly without realizing it until he was right in front of the viewscreen.

“That’s the *Atlas*,” he said, then frowned and turned to Morgan. “Or what’s left of it.”

The ship rocked. “Damn, we just took a hard impact,” Morgan said. A red light blared on her screen. “Hull breach.”

“What the hell is going on up there?” Ace shouted.

Ben jumped back into his seat. “Keep firing,” he said. “We’re going to try and get some cover.”

Morgan glanced back at him. “We are?”

“Dive for her,” Ben said. “Straight for the heart of that ... remnant.”

Morgan spun around and calculated a path—or at least the best path she could find for the moment—then began shifting the pathway as new explosions of debris around them ripped open.

She had to be careful now, with the damage to the hull, but there was some sense in trying to run close to the giant chunk of spaceship. It would act as an artificial block against the largest of the debris. They could almost make the ship a part of their own damaged hull.

“This is going to be a tight one,” Morgan said as she angled the gunship right under the front of the huge chunk of starship in front of her.

Ben stared up at it as they passed. “Where’s the front of her?”

It was a strange enough question that Morgan, busy trying not to smash into the side of it, thought for a moment that Ben might be losing his mind. Being this close to his father’s ship might be affecting him.

But then she saw what he was talking about. Unlike most of the other debris they were flying around out here, this enormous mass of starship might be dead in space and riddled with damage, but the front section hadn’t been sheared off. It hadn’t been blown in half or suffered some other catastrophic damage. Clearly, the ship had separated along some designed seam.

“That’s ... strange,” was all Morgan could muster.

Ben pursed his lips. “They left it behind,” he said.

“What?”

“If the front portion is missing, and it clearly disconnected, then where did it go?”

“Can it do that?” she asked.

Ben nodded. He knew the ship better than she did. He’d trained for months to serve on it. So if it he said it was possible, however unlikely it seemed to Morgan, it must be so.

Morgan flipped the *Lost* around and hugged as close to the floating, spinning section of what she now saw as the *Atlas* as well. There was plenty of hull damage. Some of that was surely from the debris field, but there had been a firefight here as well. She wanted to take a closer look at the seam—

An explosion sent a huge chunk of the *Atlas* debris drifting down right in front of them.

Morgan spun the *Lost* in a corkscrew, desperately aiming to fit in between the debris chunks. Only the fact that the remnants were still tightly clustered to the impact zone kept them alive. If anything large had hit their hull, they’d have been done for.

“What the hell was that?” Ben asked.

“One of those bastards has missiles,” Ace said from behind, as if he was seeing what they were seeing. “Missed us by inches.”

“It must have detonated on the base of the ship,” Morgan said. “It must have been stealth. I got nothing up here.” She shook her head at the pure dumb luck of it.

“A missile did that?” Ben asked.

“I’m guessing.”

“Don’t we have missiles, too?”

Morgan frowned. “Well, yes, but they’re dumb missiles. We’ll never be able to hit those fighters with them.”

“I don’t want to hit the fighters,” Ben said.

Morgan felt a little smile crossing her lips. She reduced flight thrust to almost zero. “Yeah, I think we can do that.”

“What the hell are we doing?” Ace shouted. “These things are practically on top of us.”

Morgan spun the gunship around like a top. “Hang on, Ace,” she said. “This is going to get messy.”

She fired off all four missiles at the far edge of the *Atlas* chunk, then shot off right after them. She waited until the moment they were going to hit and then dove hard over, dropping the z-reading as fast as possible.

The explosion of debris directly above the ship spread radially, like a slow-blooming flower of destruction.

But the fighters were just too maneuverable. The first fighter stayed right with the *Lost*, able to skim below the debris field right along with her, while the rear fighter was able to see the debris in time and break off his chase.

“At least it bought us a few seconds,” Ben said bitterly.

But even that wasn’t exactly true, Morgan now saw. By forcing the nearest fighter to hug tighter to them, it was now right on their tail. Morgan waited for the inevitable missile impact.

Instead, the fighter flipped sideways, its starboard wing and thruster exploding, and slammed upside down into the base of the *Atlas*, sending a fresh shower of debris separating into space.

“Yeaaaaaah,” shouted Ace. “Serves the asshole right for getting so close.”

“You hit one?” Morgan said incredulously.

“Don’t sound so surprised,” Ace answered.

“There’s still one out there,” Ben said.

“Thanks for the vote of confidence,” Ace said. “Where the hell is he?”

Morgan’s head snapped down to her instruments. Where was he? “I lost him after the missile barrage.”

“Well, I don’t—”

The *Lost* shook hard. Morgan was thrown forward against her restraints.

Ben, who wasn’t in his, went sprawling across the floor, and was lucky not to get hurt. “You know, the captain’s chair has restraints,” Morgan offered through gritted teeth.

Ben dragged himself up. “Learning new things all the time,” he said. “What was that?”

“She’s flying sluggish,” Morgan said. “I think we have structural damage.”

Ace came stumbling back into the cockpit, covered in soot. His left arm looked badly lacerated below the elbow.

“That bastard took out the rear cannon assembly and half the lower deck,” Ace said, pulling a patch kit out from under the jump seat in the back of the cabin.

“Are you going to live?” Morgan said. “Okay, good,” she continued, without waiting for an answer.

“We might be in serious trouble,” said Ben.

“Captain Understatement strikes again.”

Morgan shot out from behind the *Atlas* debris just as a shadow materialized above them. Two more joined it.

AIC dreadnoughts.

“I think we found that captain you were so convincing with,” Morgan said, feeling her heart sink. There was no escaping this.

“Boys and girls, we are screwed,” Ace said.

As much as Morgan hated to agree with Ace, it wasn’t looking good. Half a dozen more fighters were deployed, blocking any exit from the debris field.

“Got another lie for this one, Cap?” Ace said sarcastically.

“Because the first one worked so well,” Ben murmured.

“Yeah, that was my joke,” Ace said.

“Not really a funny one,” Morgan said.

“That’s his specialty,” Ben said absentmindedly as he looked at the dreadnoughts and fighters growing larger in the viewscreen.

“I can turn this thing around, make another run through the debris field,” offered Morgan.

“No, they’ll blow us out of space,” Ben said.

“Fair point,” Morgan said.

She glanced at Ace, and could see the abject fear of surrender there. He knew what prison life here would be like.

Ben looked almost as down, but Morgan had a feeling it was different there. She knew what he was feeling. He needed to find his father, dead or alive. Morgan would have felt the same way in his situation. Her own situation with her father was ... complicated.

“So...what do we do?” asked Morgan.

“Wave the white flag.”

FOUR

ADA ERICSSON HEARD the screech of one of the creatures they were dubbing Shapeless now, and her heart almost beat out of her chest. She hid behind a solid steel counter in one of Sanctuary Station 33's cafeteria kitchens. Before everything had gone to hell, it was a Mexican food spot.

She waited. The sound had seemed far off, but she wasn't taking chances. After half a minute, she slowly raised her head. The cafeteria was empty.

As quietly as she could, she pulled off her backpack and slipped in some beans, instant-cook ground beef packets, and dried pico de gallo mix. It felt like every sound was echoed and magnified in the empty cafeteria, but she had to take the chance. She and the few other *Atlas* survivors needed to eat, and the supplies they had back at the apartment were meager.

She had just slipped her pack back over her shoulder when she heard another screech, this one much closer. It was looking for her, she was sure of it.

She turned around, and her now-full backpack bumped against a pan. It clattered to the floor.

Shit!

The screech came again, closer still.

She dropped back down to one knee and slowly peeked over the steel counter. She saw it now. The Shapeless was in the middle of the cafeteria, with several pairs of eyes looking in seemingly every direction.

Before her time on the *Atlas*, Ada might've screamed or been terrified. She still might, she admitted to herself. She was still scared shitless. But

she'd lived long enough hiding and avoiding these monsters that she didn't panic.

She needed a distraction.

Ada surveyed her surroundings. The first thing she saw was a rack of spoons, spatulas, and knives, clinging to the wall via magnets. She could grab one and throw it across the cafeteria. Surely that would get the Shapeless thing's attention.

They're easy to distract, but they aren't stupid.

She needed something that wouldn't just distract the creature, but would hold its attention. Something it could investigate.

Ada reached up to the small medallion around her neck. She opened the face of it to reveal a small holopicture. An inch above the surface of the device, a tiny 3D video played silently. It was about ten seconds of video capture of her graduation. It was the last time her whole family had been together. As much as she hated the idea of getting rid of her only connection to home besides memories, Ada figured her life was worth the sacrifice.

And it wasn't just her life on the line. Several people were not only depending on her to get back with some food, but also to help the group survive.

Ada flipped the small medallion closed and kissed it. Then she flipped it over and touched the tiny button that would activate sound on the video capture.

She glanced back out at the creature and made sure she wouldn't be in direct sight of it. Then she flipped open the medallion and flung it across the empty cafeteria.

Instantly, the sound of her teenage self laughing erupted in the cafeteria, echoing from the bare walls.

The Shapeless spun around, screeching loudly, and rushed in what seemed to Ada was obviously the wrong direction. The echo could be playing tricks on it, but she thought it was still a poor display of echolocation.

She started to run along the far wall of the cafeteria. It was a little odd for Ada, silently running for her life as she heard her father telling everyone to smile through the projector.

As she reached the front of the cafeteria, she ran past the brutally butchered remains of innocent civilians who'd committed the sole crime of calling the Sanctuary Station their home.

Ada made it to the hall outside and stopped. She tried to slow her breathing so she could listen and watch for more of the monsters. Nobody would mistake Ada for a hardened Marine, but considering she was still alive, she didn't give a shit what anyone else would think. Right now she just had to keep moving.

Still, she made a conscious effort to move with slow deliberateness. She needed to get to the nearest ventilation duct. It was the only safe way to move around the station undetected that they had found. The Shapeless surely knew that she and the few others from the *Atlas* were still there, but they didn't know exactly where. For now, that was all they had, and she wouldn't be the one to lead the bastards right to them.

Ada made a run for the ventilation duct across the hallway. She'd left the grate loose when she'd come this way, so she knew she could get back in quickly. She threw her pack in, took a last glance around to make sure she was undetected, and slipped into the shaft, pulling the grate back up quickly.

No one liked tight spaces. Ada *hated* them, but at that moment they were a necessity, so she took a deep breath and tried not to think about the metal walls closing in on her and crushing her. Would that have been a better death than at the hands of those things out there? She'd take either over starvation, she figured. At least it would be quick.

On her hands and knees, back intermittently scraping against the seams where the sections of air duct fit together, Ada kept moving, shoving the food bag ahead of her. Through the vents she could hear everything. There were screams. There were screeches. None of them stopped her.

Until she heard the cries of a child.

There's no way that's real, she told herself. Think about it. How could a kid have survived this long? You've barely survived this long.

Ada was about to move on when she heard the cries turn into pleas.

"Please...anyone, help me. Help me."

Ada slowed, but didn't stop. It had to be a Shapeless that had seen her go into the duct. It *had* to be.

But as the girl's pleas intensified, she wasn't so sure. Hadn't she been careful to make sure she'd gone in undetected? What if it really was a little girl?

Ada finally stopped. Cursing herself for being so naïve, she turned and strayed from the path she'd drawn in marker on the duct walls. She tried to

track down the source of the little girl's pleas. In order to do, she had to take the wrong turn at the forked intersection of the ducts. To the right led over to an office in the commercial district. That office was the gateway down to the residential floor, where the other few survivors took refuge. To the left? No one really knew what was to the left.

Ada took a deep breath and headed left. She didn't feel like an explorer charting new lands. She felt like an idiot, crawling into what was surely a trap.

Ada thought she'd found the source. She saw a vent not too far away, at a dead end as far as she was concerned. It was just slices of light at the end of a dark, cramped hall.

"Please, help. It hurts." The little girl still suffered.

Ada wasn't prepared for what she saw once she reached the vent. From a side view, she saw one of the Shapeless sitting on the floor in front of what looked like an ice cream shop or something. She couldn't make out what it was doing until...

Oh, God!

Ada regretted coming and investigating the cries. The Shapeless was in a revolting state of shift. Some of its bones were outside its skin. Its muscles and tendons writhed and slithered around its body. One of its hands was inside the throat of a dead girl, no doubt butchered either by it or by those like it. From what it looked like, it was trying to become the dead girl.

Suddenly the Shapeless stopped whatever it was doing. It turned its head towards the vents.

The Shapeless' face was like the girl's face, only twisted, not quite put together. It was on top of a crooked neck, still trying to figure out how to be human. Smiling, its jaw hung too low, hauntingly so.

"Please! Help me!" pleaded the Shapeless in the little girl's voice. It looked straight at Ada with stolen eyes.

Ada scrambled backwards, which was hard in the tight confines of the air ducts. She couldn't turn around, not without making so much noise the creature would surely hear her. Even if it struggled to use sound to locate her, it would find her sooner or later. So she just kept backing up, eyes on the far end of the vent as she went, waiting for the little girl's haunting eyes and grotesque, misshapen face to appear.

But the Shapeless didn't follow. She managed to back her way all the way to the fork. Once there, she was able to turn around. She felt numb.

She'd felt numb since the *Atlas* had arrived here.

And then she was crying. She felt the hot tears on her face, and she struggled to keep herself quiet. She balled up her fists and wanted desperately to slam her hands against the air ducts, but she knew the sound would echo throughout the thin metallic tunnels.

She grabbed her face in her hands and clamped down hard on her wet cheeks until she felt the pain of her fingernails there. She kept going until she drew blood. She jerked her hands free and punched herself in the face again and again until her cheeks ached. It was stupid and pointless. She felt dizzy.

And then she stopped. Slowly, she regained control of her breathing. She wiped the tears from her eyes and the snot from her nose. With one last deep breath, she turned and started down the right side of the ventilation shaft toward safety.

FIVE

“I JUST WANT you to know, I hate you,” Ace said.

“Duly noted,” Ben said.

Morgan rolled her eyes, but said nothing.

Ben, Morgan, and Ace were all in shackles, wrists chained behind their backs.

“We’ll find a way out of this,” Ben said, trying to sound surer than he felt.

Ben scanned the AIC transport ship they were in. He had enough knowledge of ships like this to pick up a good sense of the ship. He could see that Morgan, too, was scanning the room closely. He imagined that with her enhanced eyes, she was getting more details than he was, although he’d be surprised if she had more working knowledge of the AIC than he did. Still, her calm demeanor surprised him, almost like she knew something the rest of them didn’t.

Ben put the thought out of his mind. He didn’t exactly know Morgan, but she’d been as good as her word so far. Besides, it wasn’t like he wasn’t hiding secrets of his own.

“This is bullshit!” Ace barked.

“Shut up!” yelled one of the AIC soldiers in the transport. He stuck the end of his rifle into Ace’s back. Ace struggled around, but only got it dug deeper in.

“What did I just say?” the man said to Ace. “Stop squirming or I’ll make your face uglier.”

“You said to shut up,” Ace said. “Not to stop squirming.”

The man shook his head as the guard next to him smiled. Ben wasn't sure of the wisdom of trolling a man with a gun in your back, but Ace seemed to be pulling it off. Maybe he wasn't as useless as he looked.

Which just left Ben. *How ya gonna talk your way out of this one, Benny?*

Ben contemplated his options as the AIC transport ship landed in the dreadnought docking bay. He didn't have many. Honesty, up to a point, but how much did the AIC already know?

Ben was supposed to be on the *Atlas*. For months before the historic ship had launched, he'd trained for the mission. Not only did he memorize every nut and bolt on the vessel, he knew the details of their mission, how to track their homing signal and emergency calls, and even about the four fusion devices, the so called planet-killers, that Ben suspected were still out there, wherever the rest of the *Atlas* was.

They'd ambushed and destroyed the *Atlas*, and now they were combing through the wreckage. Why else would they have been out here?

That was certainly what anyone else would think. That was what everyone on Earth already assumed, and there *was* AIC debris out there in what was clearly a battlefield in space. Everything about it screamed AIC ambush.

But everyone else didn't know what Ben knew. About the Oblivion. About their shapeshifting alien friends. About their plans to sabotage the peace.

Was it possible that the AIC was in the same boat as the UEF, trying to figure out who'd sabotaged possible peace?

The three prisoners were led out of the transport into the dreadnought docking bay. As they walked down the ramp, Ben caught sight of the captain he'd spoken to earlier. Her hat was gone, but her demeanor still was all business. She was surrounded by twelve soldiers.

"Welcome to the *Perseverance*. I'm Captain LeFleur." Her gaze drifted over the three prisoners before landing on Ben. "Ah, I see it's Ben Sanders of the *Swan*, wasn't that it?"

Ben chuckled. "So it is."

"And what is it really?" LeFleur said. "And before you answer"—she raised one long, thin finger—"remember that you are very much at my mercy for attacking AIC property and evading capture. I'm well within my rights to blow all three of you out an airlock right here and right now."

“Well, my name is Whydon Yagofuc—” Ace started.

One of the guards shoved a muzzle in his kidney, and Ace crumpled down in pain.

LeFleur glanced at Ace before turning back to Ben expectantly.

Here goes nothing.

“My name is Ben Saito, former UEF Lieutenant Commander, son of Captain Lee Saito, commander of the UEF *Atlas*.”

Ben could feel Morgan look over at him in disbelief. Clearly, she hadn’t been expecting that much honestly. But if he was going to start lying later, he needed to start telling the truth now.

LeFleur examined Ben’s face for several seconds. Her eyes flittered, and he had a feeling that she was getting information from her own HUD. He didn’t think of himself as being an officer of any great consequence to the AIC, but if they kept the same tabs on them that the UEF kept on the AIC, he suspected pulling the facial recognition was trivial.

“Mr. Saito is coming with me,” LeFleur said. She turned as a pair of hands gruffly shoved Ben forward. “Take the other two down to the brig. We’ll figure out what to do with them later.”

Two soldiers took Ace and Morgan in the other direction. The former tried to fight his way out of custody, cursing and even biting along the way, until one of the soldiers knocked him loopy with the butt of their assault rifle. The latter went silently.

Ben followed LeFleur. Not a word was spoken as they left the docking bay and went into the hallways of the *Perseverance*. It was fascinating for him to see the inside of an enemy dreadnought. Overall construction methods between the Earth and outer colonies differed little, but it was generally assumed there were big differences underneath. What struck Ben was how similar they actually seemed.

LeFleur stopped in front of her office. She waved off her security team, leaving just her and Ben outside the sliding airtight door. Much to his surprise, she took off his shackles.

“We don’t need these, do we, Lieutenant Commander?” asked LeFleur. It wasn’t a real question, seeing that she wasn’t really looking for an answer.

“Kinda depends on what you want,” answered Ben.

“I want the truth,” LeFleur said.

“In my experience, nobody who says that means it.”

LeFleur turned around and jammed a blaster into his gut. Ben doubled over in surprise as the breath was knocked out of him.

LeFleur leaned over and put the cool point of the muzzle to Ben's temple. She thumped him on the chin until he looked up, still gasping for breath. She smiled wickedly. "Consider me an exception."

SIX

“THIS WAY.” LeFleur pressed her hand against the panel outside the door. The soldiers on either side of Ben dragged him upright. He was still unsteady on his feet as he heard a sharp click and saw a green light as the door slid open.

The two soldiers escorted Ben into the office; then LeFleur shared a comment with one of the men, and to Ben’s surprise, they both saluted and retreated out.

LeFleur’s office looked no better or worse than any other officer’s office. The only real difference was that there were an AIC flag and medals on the walls. A model of the *Perseverance* sat on her desk next to old-fashioned picture frames, pointing towards her side of the desk so Ben couldn’t see them.

“Now.” LeFleur sat behind her desk. She tossed the shackles on it, then leaned back in her chair. “Let’s get a couple of things straight before we begin our...discussion. One, don’t lie to me.” She motioned for a small spherical drone to activate and float beside her. The camera in it was tiny and sleek, as with most AIC tech. “As a UEF officer, you know what this is, yah?”

“A truthteller,” Ben said, still rubbing his stomach. “It’s designed to read the pupil dilation and call me out on bullshit.” What he didn’t tell her was that he’d had his eyes treated to render the device useless.

LeFleur frowned, and Ben assumed she was getting the information in her HUD. “Every UEF officer is swatted,” Ben said, using the popular slang for the procedure. “But I assure you, I have no interest in lying to you,” he lied.

LeFleur frowned again and took a deep breath. Ironically, the annoyance on her face actually softened her features. Beneath the severe demeanor, she was pretty in her own imposing way. *She also just had a blaster to your temple*, he reminded himself.

“I’ve met a lot of people who think that they’re good liars,” she said. “None of them are. You can fool this tech, but you can’t fool me, yah?”

Ben nodded.

“Second,” she said, before he could speak. “Just because you aren’t in restraints or locked up with your crew right now doesn’t mean that that’s not where you’ll end up, depending on the answers you give me. And don’t see the lack of restraints as an opportunity to try and escape. I’d hate to have to kill you before we got to know each other.” LeFleur’s steely gaze was unwavering.

Ben raised his hands with a smile. “Promise,” he said, in what he hoped was a winningly casual manner.

LeFleur sat back and softened her features. Ben knew it was an interview trick, but he still felt himself relax. She was *very* pretty, he realized.

“Good. You said that you trained to be on the *Atlas*. How is that possible with that?” LeFleur pointed at Ben’s metallic robotic arm.

“This ole thing? It’s a long story—”

“Make it short.”

“I was in training for the *Atlas* mission when a terrorist attack a couple of days before the launch took my arm and leg.”

And my mother.

He glanced up as the truth-teller drone changed positions. It was still recording, even if it wasn’t reading his eyes.

“I’m familiar. We all heard about that. It was the Oblivion cult, correct?”

“Yup...they attacked multiple points throughout the city. I was unlucky enough to be on one of the trains they bombed. Anyway, there’s a strict UEF policy for any soldier who suffered wounds as egregious as mine to take a mandatory minimum leave from active duty. I wasn’t happy about that, and made my reservations about their policies very public.”

“So they terminated your service?”

Ben nodded. His first outright lie.

“That would never happen here,” LeFleur said. “As long as you can fight...we need all the soldiers we can get. Can’t afford to just let one go.”

“Really? Looks like you got plenty of souls on board here.”

“We’re not here to talk about us. We’re here to talk about you and what you know. Tell me what you know about the mission. Do you know where the *Atlas* went?”

Ben paused for a second and thought about his next words. He’d tried to make the conversation more personable, but LeFleur had shut that down pretty expertly. It was time to get down to business.

“I have no idea where the *Atlas* went. That’s just the truth; in fact, it’s why I’m out here in the middle of bumfuck nowhere space. As far as information about the mission, what do you want to know?” Ben wasn’t sure how far he’d go, but he wasn’t a soldier anymore. Strictly speaking, he had no real loyalty to the UEF, though he was no turncoat.

“For starters, what was their mission, to the best of your knowledge? I know that sometimes only the command knows the specifics, but tell me what you were told.”

“Pretty simple, actually. We were to depart from Annapolis on Earth and make a fold jump to these coordinates along the edge of AIC space.”

“Inside AIC space,” LeFleur said. “Continue.”

Ben rolled his eyes. “From there, it was beyond my scope of knowledge. I understand there was supposed to be a series of diplomatic hoops to jump through that was supposed to build trust”—he used air quotes—“and then we’d make our way deeper into AIC space until we got within range to communicate with your home planet, Vassar-1.” He shrugged. “We were told that we had an understanding that our ship wouldn’t be met as the enemy. I suspect my father was to spearhead negotiations with your high command, although nobody expressly told me that.” Ben told the truth as LeFleur listened intently.

“If it was indeed a mission of peace, why send such a big, heavily-armed ship?”

“Because we didn’t trust you.”

LeFleur looked skeptical.

“I mean, can you blame us for taking precautions in case things went south?” Ben asked. “Which, by the look of things, they did,” he offered.

“We didn’t attack the *Atlas*. The AIC wants peace just as badly as the Terrans do. With that said...”

Ben watched LeFleur's cool demeanor waver. She looked away from him, and was silent for a second. He could hear the whir of the drone floating nearby. He guessed she was again accessing something on her HUD.

"There were reports that there was more to the *Atlas*. We knew it was heavily armed and advanced, even by our standards. But our spies told us that there was some kind of super-weapon on board."

"Reading the underground media, are you?" Ben asked.

"Excuse me?"

Ben shook his head. "Joke. They're always accusing us of something crazy."

"Is it crazy?"

Ben tried a different tack. "So is this is why you're out here combing the debris? You're really buying into that?"

"One of the reasons, yes. But you haven't answered the question. Was there a super-weapon of some kind on board? We were told it was strong enough to destroy a planet. Maybe Vassar-1?"

"Well, that'd definitely be one way to end the war," Ben chuckled. "But no, I don't know anything about that. And I don't know anybody who gave that mumbo-jumbo any real credibility."

LeFleur didn't seem amused. "We've seen plenty of mumbo-jumbo from your side, yah?"

Ben raised an eyebrow. "Look, I'm just telling you what I know. It sounds far-fetched to me, but I guess that doesn't mean there wasn't anything like that on board. I mean, not everything got vetted by a junior officer like me."

"Even the son of the captain?"

"Even so."

LeFleur stared Ben straight in his eyes for another long moment. She had piercing green eyes, and he found it hard to look away.

"What can you tell me about your father, the man helming the *Atlas*, Captain Lee Saito?"

Where do you want me to start? "A good officer," Ben said honestly. "A leader. Respected."

"That sounds pretty rote," she said. "Considering he was your father."

Ben leaned forward. "Well, this might come to a shock to you, Captain, but my old man and I didn't always see eye-to-eye."

For the first time since he'd sat down, LeFleur cracked a smile. "You don't say."

"Shocker, I know," Ben said, leaning back.

LeFleur seemed to glance at one of the pictures on her desk facing her. "Shocker," she agreed somewhat wistfully.

"I'll tell you this, though. Hard bastard or not, he always completed his mission, no matter the cost." Ben thought about that ill-fated mission aboard the *Valiant*. The fire in the engine room. His friends who'd died. "At least he used to."

"Why do you refer to him in the past tense? Do you have reason to believe he's dead?"

"Besides the fact that no one has heard from him and his crew for weeks? Maybe it's the fact that the majority of his ship is floating out in that debris field," Ben scoffed. "Call it a hunch, but I don't think things are looking good."

"And yet here you are," LeFleur said, steely-eyed as ever. "Chasing after a dead man."

Ben sat back in his chair. "Dickhead or not, he's still my father. I have to know for sure."

LeFleur looked at him for another long moment; then she waved away the spherical drone, which returned to its perch atop of a nearby table. She stood up as two AIC soldiers walked in. "Thank you for your candor, Mr. Saito."

The soldiers took Ben back to the cell with Ace and Morgan.

"And here he is," Ace said derisively. "Use that silver tongue of yours to sweeten up that reb Captain?"

Ben took a seat on the bunk in the corner of the cell. "Oh, yeah, it went great. She really warmed up to me."

"So are we as good as dead, or are we gonna be locked up for the rest of our lives?" asked Morgan.

"Same difference," Ace spat.

"I dunno. Both. Neither. That LeFleur is hard to read."

"What did you tell her?" asked Morgan.

"I told her the truth," Ben said, assuming for sure there would be listening devices down here. "Let's see where that gets us."

Ace spat. "Never done much for me."

SEVEN

WHEN ADA REACHED the end of the duct, she dropped down into an office. She knew it well, even if she didn't know whose it was. There was a debate between the other survivors if it was some station official's office or simply a fancier form of janitor's closet. The truth didn't matter. What did was that one of the walls had been broken up and removed. Behind it there was piping and electrical wires.

A week of being hungry made the survivors get innovative. Ada helped as they looked at schematics and blueprints through their HUDs. It was another unintended gift from Royce, the dead engineer they owed their lives to.

Armed with the blueprints, they'd figured out that the office was right above apartment 254. So they made a hole in the ceiling, the office's floor, to climb through. That way they'd pretty much have direct access to the vents, their lifeline throughout the station.

"Sorry I took so long," Ada said as soon as the other survivors grabbed her legs and helped pull her down into the apartment.

"It's okay. Shit happens out there," Rollins said. The *Atlas*' commander was, as usual, the first to greet Ada. He took one look at her face and said, "You don't have to tell me and I don't want to know."

"I got..." Ada looked around. Things were in bad shape in the apartment. The plumbing on the station had lasted for a little while but with the staff dead, it had eventually gone to hell. Their floor had a water tank with enough clean water for what the survivors hoped would be another week. After that, things were going to get dicey. Bringing food back from

the cafeterias was one thing, but water was a greater challenge to get and move.

Their lone toilet had backed up, filling the quarters with the smell of human waste. Add to that the smell of death from those injured who didn't make it. No one had washed since before the *Atlas* set off from Annapolis.

"You got exactly as much as we need," Rollins said. Even without a left hand or a captain, the commander stayed positive. He took the backpack off of Ada and handed it off to one of the survivors. She and Rollins took turns on the food scavenging efforts. They'd get together later and talk about where she'd gone and what she'd seen out there.

There were six people left. Ada and Rollins were the defacto leaders of the group. They were joined by two other members of the *Atlas* crew, Private Tomas Ruis and a cook, Tanisha Grimes. Lastly, there were two survivors from the station. A sixteen-year-old girl, Francesca DeLeon, had actually found them. Her story of how was a little murky, but they'd confirmed she wasn't a Shapeless. And then there was the elderly Walter Van Ryan, a lifelong resident of the station. In fact, he swore that he'd helped build it. If the three stories he told over and over were any indication, it was true. Ada couldn't imagine how hard it must be to see the station in its current condition, but Walter was an optimist. Ada knew that because he loved to remind everyone of this fact. "At my age, you have to be an optimist," he'd said once, right after Ada had found him in one of her early food excursions. "All my pessimistic friends are dead."

"You ready?" asked Tomas as he approached Ada with a rifle. He wasn't being particularly aggressive, but made it clear there were consequences if she wasn't.

"Yeah, of course." Ada knew what was next. For the safety of the survivors, they needed to be sure that she was human and not an alien posing to be her. It'd happened before. Safety first.

"Mmmm, beans, my favorite," said Tanisha sarcastically as she took inventory of the food Ada had gathered.

"You want some prime rib, maybe some fresh fruits and vegetables? Feel free to crawl out there and take a stroll around the market," Ada said as she put down her gun and headed towards the apartment's bathroom at the end of Tomas' rifle. She was already bracing herself for the smell.

"No, that's okay. I can make beans work," Tanisha said, her voice trailing off. Ada could tell the cook was already formulating possible

recipes in her head.

“At this point anything would be good,” Rollins said, ever the peacekeeper.

“I’ll never forget the first spaceship I ever flew on,” Walter said, beginning a story that must have been triggered by the thought of eating beans. At least, that was probably it. Ada had heard plenty of Walter’s stories that seemed to have nothing to do with the subject at hand. He wasn’t prone to let little things like context get in the way of a good story.

Along the way to the bathroom, Ada passed by the doorway to the only bedroom. Francesca was lying on the bed. The circle of red light just under the skin on her temple let Ada know the teen was listening to music through her HUD.

“Okay, in ya go,” ordered Tomas. His nose twitched, and Ada put her hand over hers. He watched as Ada entered the bathroom. Thankfully, there was a door between the toilet and the rest of the bathroom. Unfortunately, it didn’t seal enough to contain the smell.

“Now...I’ll turn around. Okay?” Tomas turned to his side, careful not to have his back to her, but still not watching her undress.

Ada stripped down to her underwear and climbed into the shower/spa. Every apartment in Sanctuary Station 33 had these combo units. Since each unit technically had a spa, the company that built them could legally market them as “luxury” housing, and charge a little more.

A bit leaky and completely unreliable, the spa was the only way the survivors had to tell friend from foe. The Shapeless didn’t do well with extreme temperatures. If the spa was jacked up to the max, a person could only last maybe five minutes at most, but one of those monsters would react almost instantly, at least in theory. They hadn’t detected one yet.

“Ready?” asked Tomas, still staring away from Ada. He was actually staring at Francesca’s legs, which could be seen in through the bedroom doorway from his position. She was wearing shorts, giving him a good view of her bare skin.

“Let’s get this over with,” said Ada. She sealed the spa door and watched as the leak protocol system checked the seal. Because the shower used the same recycled water, it worked even while the plumbing around them didn’t, but it also meant that loss of water had to be carefully limited. Some water loss was inevitable, and the system had been designed to periodically refill, but that wasn’t happening now. So every time they ran it,

a little more water was lost. Since it had become their makeshift alien detector, they were restricting themselves to no showers at the moment. Better to be dirty and monster-free.

A green light told Ada everything looked good. She sat down on the shower bench in her underwear and waited.

Tomas didn't bother with easing Ada into the heat. He cranked it up to ten and watched as the shower/spa glass fogged up. Closing the door behind him, he stepped into the bathroom and kept the rifle trained forward.

"You still you?" asked Tomas after a couple of minutes. He glanced over at the thermometer for the spa. It was maxing out. The red area meant the water temperature was unsafe.

Ada sat in the steam and heat, sweat dripping off her forehead. Her thoughts drifted to what she'd seen in the vents. Now, more than ever, she thought about death. Not just dying; that'd been on her mind since the *Atlas* was ambushed what seemed like years ago. No, she thought about what would happen to her after.

Would Ada become like that poor dead little girl, simply a subject for one of the Shapeless to copy? How would her family know she was dead or where she died? Her whole family was buried back home in Sweden, outside their family home, even those who'd died in the war. Was there any chance that she would join them, or would she be nothing but a frozen half-rotted corpse when the life support eventually failed on Sanctuary Station 33?

"Yeah, I'm still me. And I'm about ready to get out of here."

"Give it one more minute. Sorry, Ada, just need to be sure. You know?"

"Yeah, yeah, no problem. Just do me a favor, huh?"

"What's that?" Tomas asked.

"Count faster? It's hot as hell in here."

Tomas laughed. "Sure thing. Already at thirty seconds."

"Good man."

Once her session in the shower/spa was done, Ada left the bathroom after Tomas. Her pants, shoes, and boots already back on, she put on her shirt as she stepped out, thankful to put the smell of the bathroom behind her.

Tomas wasn't even pinching his nose. "How do you stand that?" she asked.

"Smells don't bother me," he said. "Aliens do."

Ada walked into the bedroom to talk to Francesca, who didn't even acknowledge her presence. The shine in her eyes indicated that she wasn't only listening to music; she was watching videos through her HUD, too.

Ada sat down on the bed next to her. In order to get her attention, she gently shook the teen's leg.

"Hey," said Ada once she had Francesca's attention.

"What? What's up?" asked Francesca. Her response started with a shitty teenager tone, but quickly changed to something genuine. Ada couldn't imagine what she was going through. A teenager who saw her whole family slaughtered by alien monsters? Ada assumed she was in something like prolonged shock, even if outwardly she appeared like any other teenager Ada had ever known, and she included herself in that list.

"What ya watching?"

"Oh...I, I was just watching this dumb show on the Free Network. It's like, I dunno, what'd they used to call them back in the day? Reality show! Yeah, it's just some dumb reality show about a family of rich miners on the edge of space. It's stupid, but my mom and I never missed—" Francesca caught herself. "It's just dumb fun," she finished.

"That's awesome. Can I watch with you?" asked Ada.

"Cool." Francesca moved over on the bed and made room for Ada.

Ada had meant to just console Francesca, but after a few minutes, she realized dumb fun was exactly what she needed.

EIGHT

SOME PEOPLE SAY knowledge is power. For Ben, knowledge was a curse. Back before the terrorist attack in Annapolis, before he'd lost two limbs and his mother, he was given something, a drive, containing information that only he had and didn't know what to do with. How did he warn LeFleur and the *Perseverance* about aliens from the stars coming to destroy humanity? How did he even believe that himself? And that was only the beginning.

"Should we share the neural implants we got from the Oblivion?"

"We don't even know what's on them," Morgan said.

"I think that's a chip we wait to play," Ace agreed from the cot, picking at his toenails.

Ben sat on the floor of the cell in the *Perseverance's* brig. He had made the mistake of offering the only cot to Morgan, who'd declined, and that opened the way for Ace to hop in without second thoughts.

"Great work on all this by the way, Cap," Ace said.

"I try," replied Ben.

"You know the best thing about all this? It's so much easier hunting down those Oblivion assholes here in this cell. Right here, from this wet seat on the floor, I can pick em off one by one." Ace mimed aiming and firing a sniper rifle. "It's the best place really, the most effective."

"I'm glad you're so pleased." Ben stood up. He groaned a bit, as his knees ached from sitting with them bent in front of him on the floor for hours.

"Though I guess it ain't really your fault. It's our fault for bringing you aboard."

“I wasn’t really ever a fan,” Morgan said.

“Thanks for that vote of confidence,” Ben said, genuinely wounded.

“Just calling it like it is,” Morgan said, and Ben believed her. She was a lot of things, but she wasn’t one to blow smoke up anybody’s ass.

“You never had the heart for this. You’re just an angry kid trying to get revenge for his mamma,” Ace said.

Ben felt something snap inside himself. “Do yourself a favor,” he said. “Shut your mouth before I put you out.”

Ace smiled and stood up. “Knock me out, huh?” He hopped down from the cot and strutted over to Ben. “And exactly how do you plan on doing that?”

Ben knocked Ace out with one metallic punch to his scarred face. The loudmouth was out for a few seconds before coming to on the floor. He was dazed, tried to get up, but fell back down. Blood drizzled down from his nose.

“Bastard,” Ace said, still woozy, as he wiped the blood from his nose. “You used that damn robot arm.”

“Didn’t know there were rules.”

“There are always rules,” said a deep voice from beyond the bars.

Ben spun around. There were four armed AIC soldiers on the other side of the bars. One of them had three sets of restraints in his free hand. He was the one talking. “Here is the only rule, Mr. Saito. Do as you’re told or get shot. Do you understand the rules?”

“Seems pretty clear,” Ben said as a man stepped forward to shackle him. Anything that got them out of this cell was a good thing in his mind.

“That’s just one rule,” Ace said as he got up and sat on the cot. “Get your story straight, asshole.”

Morgan stood up, yawning, as one of the soldiers was putting the shackles on her wrists.

“Up! The captain wants to see you lot,” said one of the soldiers.

“Looks like we’ve been called to the principal’s office,” said Ace as he and his fellow crew members were led through the halls, out of the brig, and into an elevator that took them up to the operations room of the *Perseverance*.

“You lied to me,” said LeFleur when she turned to face Ben.

“Did I?” Ben asked, wondering how she could know about his knowledge of the planet-killer aboard the *Atlas*. Maybe they had found it, or

a portion of the components.

LeFleur stood above a table that holographically projected a section of space, stars, planets, and all. The operations room was filled with AIC duty officers, all staring at the newly arrived Ace, Morgan, and Ben.

“I don’t think so,” Ben said, answering his own question.

“I assure you, you did.” LeFleur made a couple swipes of her hand. Three digital wanted posters were displayed above the table. Each one had a member of the *Lost’s* crew on them. Under their pictures were bounties listed in standard credits. “How else can you explain this?”

“I never lied about that,” Ben said. “I just never mentioned it.”

“It says here, Mr. Saito, that you and your friends are wanted for killing a DC police officer. That is a hell of a lie of omission.”

“Wait...you said no killing cops,” Ace said. “You telling me that you were wasting those bastards and didn’t let me have any fun?” He wasn’t upset with the situation, just that his blood lust was hypocritically censored.

“It’s complicated, Captain,” Ben said. “We, that is to say, *I* didn’t mean to kill anyone. But things happen. I didn’t think our troubles concerned you.”

“Many things ‘concern’ me. But you’re right; your issues with the law in UEF space don’t involve us. Still, it leads me to wonder why you felt the need to kill a police officer. What were you doing back home that necessitated escaping the law by any means necessary? What are you and your crew, really?” LeFleur was unflappable, as were her fellow officers, who all judged Ben’s crew with their icy stares.

Ben started to respond, but was quickly cut off.

“Think before you speak. Another lie, even one of omission, and you and your crew will be jettisoned out to join the debris field.”

In spite of the seriousness of her statement, Ben felt himself smiling. He glanced over at Ace and Morgan. Ace was scowling at him. Morgan was looking straight ahead.

Ben could only reply with a single word. “Revenge.”

NINE

“I BEG YOUR PARDON?” LeFleur asked.

“All three of us lost something,” Ben said. “Family. Friends.” He held up his own arm. “Actual body parts. Lives that mattered. All to the cult of the Oblivion.”

LeFleur eyed him up and down. “That doesn’t really answer the question.”

“Sure it does,” Ben said. “We don’t want anyone else going through what we’re going through. Nobody should have to live like this.” He shrugged, glancing at Ace.

Ace took as an opening. “We hunt and kill all the members of the cult we can find. It’s as simple as that.”

Ben didn’t really think it was as simple as that, but Ace was defiant as LeFleur eyed him up and down.

“Simple as that, yah? We have some on board who believe in the Abyss. We have others at home, including women and children. Would you hunt down and kill them too?”

Ace looked like he might agree to that, so Ben stepped in.

“Of course not. We’re hunting down the radicals, the dangerous ones. And their leadership. But if I may be so bold, Captain, you might want to look into those who believe in the Abyss on board your ship.” Ben lifted his arms, hoping to accentuate the metallic one. “You never know when there are sleepers, wolves among the sheep.”

“I assure you, Mr. Saito, that there are no ‘sheep’ on my dreadnought. Why are you really out here?”

“I told you. I’m looking for my father and the *Atlas*. That’s the truth.”

“With all due respect, ma’am,” Morgan said, addressing the captain for the first time, “why did you call us up here? I doubt it was to just to discuss wanted posters and cults.”

“You’re right. That’s not the only reason I summoned you.” LeFleur walked around the table over to Ben. “This case of your father’s ship, the *Atlas*, it grows more curious by the second. Take the debris field out there. We found a hefty amount of unnatural radiation out in space. It indicates that there was detonation of a nuclear weapon. That combined with the other wreckage tell us that there was a fight.”

“No kidding,” Ace said. “Why did you guys attack them?”

“What makes you think we attacked them?”

Ace guffawed, like LeFleur had just told him that folding space wasn’t possible. “Why wouldn’t you?”

“I recognized plenty of the debris out there,” Ben interjected, trying to make a slightly more useful point. “I’m sure you have as well. Pieces of AIC Interceptor fighters. Those are pieces of your ships.”

“Yet we have no record of any AIC unit, fleet, or fighter group being dispatched to attack the *Atlas*,” LeFleur said. “Our fleet was actually assigned to come out and meet them, escort them to Vassar-1.”

“Still, those are your ships.”

“Like I told you earlier, yah, we’ve all seen no end to deception on both sides in this war.”

Morgan frowned. “But you should be able to figure it out pretty quickly, right? I mean, there are transponders. Data identifiers.”

LeFleur waved away Morgan’s statements. “All can be faked where there’s enough will. It will take weeks to figure out what really happened here.”

“Weeks?” Ben said incredulously.

LeFleur shook her head. “To convince all factions on the AIC council to form a consensus, it will probably take months.” She put her hands on her hips and rubbed her chin. “However, they’re on Vassar-1, and I’m here.” She glanced at the man next to her, who Ben hadn’t even noticed. He appeared to be an aide of some kind. He handed her a flat data board that she waved her hand above, and a three-dimensional field of information appeared.

“Two days ago, a UEF outpost on the edges of known space, Magellan 5, was attacked,” LeFleur said. “Reports from survivors say that it was

attacked by an AIC force. Again, there is no record of any AIC unit, fleet, or fighter group being dispatched to attack the colony.”

“So you have a rogue force,” Ace said. “What’s that got to do with us?”

“We couldn’t figure out how or why these attacks were happening, or who was perpetuating them. Then we got this mayday message early this morning.” She looked at Ben. “I believe you know the man who sent it.”

She waved over the data board, and this time an enlarged video still image popped up of Ben’s father, Captain Lee Saito.

TEN

BEN ALMOST FELL DOWN BACKWARDS when the video message came up. His father looked a bit beaten up. Static and other interference made reading his expression hard, but his mannerisms were just as Ben remembered them.

“This is Captain Lee Saito of the UEF *Atlas*. I hope this message reaches someone, anyone who can help us. We were ambushed, and our ship has been disabled. The surviving members of the *Atlas* crew have taken refuge in Sanctuary Station 33. Coordinates accompany this message. I am asking for immediate aid and rescue. The situation is dire. This is Captain...” The message automatically replayed.

Ben took a moment to process what he saw and heard. He saw his father, heard his father, but something inside him didn't accept it. If he was being honest, he'd expected to find his father dead, floating in a rudderless ship somewhere in space. Now that he saw proof that his father was alive, he had trouble accepting it.

“What do you make of that, Mr. Saito?” asked LeFleur, carefully examining Ben's reaction.

“I, uh...when did you...what channel did this come in on? The message? How did you find it?” Ben gathered himself. He fought back the tears that started to pool in his eyes.

“It came in on the emergency band. At first, we considered that it might be a ploy from pirates to lure us in. We don't accept UEF transmission handshakes out here, so there was no way to authenticate it. But our comms team worked on it and verified the sender's identity, or at least, that it was

far beyond the sophistication levels of pirates, yah.” She crossed her arms and looked at Ben. “As far as I’m concerned, that’s your father.”

She looked at Ben expectantly.

“It was him,” Ben said. The happiness he felt caused him to be almost light-headed. The old man was alive!

“You’re sure?”

“He sounded like he had a stick up his ass. Gave away minimal information over the emergency beacon while confirming the status, location, and situation.” Ben nodded. “Textbook. That’s him.”

LeFleur looked like his answer actually pained her. “Fair enough,” she said at last, her voice an octave lower. Her eyes really were penetrating. Ben could see why it was hard to get a lie past her. She waved the video away. “That wasn’t the only message he sent. We got this one early this morning.” She hesitated, making eye contact with Ben. For the first time, her face seemed to soften. Then she looked down and activated the video.

This one was quite different from the first. Saito appeared distraught. There was screeching in the background that sounded like something animal, wild. Behind those were screams. It was an unsettling soundtrack.

Saito turned to the camera of the video. He was crying, something Ben had only seen his father do once before in his life, and that had been at Ben’s hospital bed when he told him about the death of Ben’s mother. His father took a moment before speaking again.

“I...I’ve been thinking a lot, the last couple of days. What does it mean to be human?” Saito raised his hand up to his face and seemingly investigated it. Each digit looked to be fascinating to him. He laughed, a nervous laugh, exposing bloodstained teeth. “What makes us human?”

There was blood coming from a gash on his forehead that trickled down his cheek. He looked feverish.

Something was wrong with him.

Saito lowered his hand and stared intensely into the camera. Tears still flowed. “Am I...is it the soul? Is that what makes people people, and not just an assortment of meat, bone, and electrical signals? Is it love? I... nothing is as it...monsters masquerading as men. Is that all we are? Don’t come looking for us. We are lost.”

The video ended. No one said anything for several seconds. Ben thought he might throw up. Finally, LeFleur asked, “What do you make of that?”

“I don’t...” Ben closed his eyes hard and tried to rack his brain for an explanation. Parts of the info on the hyper drive he’d been given before the terrorist attacks in Annapolis ran through his head.

Monsters masquerading as men. That was what he’d said. It had to be Oblivion, didn’t it? What else could it be?

Ben couldn’t accept it. He wouldn’t believe that his father had fallen prey to the Oblivion’s plans. “None of this makes any sense,” he said.

LeFleur bent her neck and head to the side slightly. “How so?”

“My father—Captain Saito—he was a rock. I mean, I’ve never seen the man show any other emotions than anger at me, or love towards my mom, but never *that*. Never. I don’t even know what to call that.”

LeFleur wiped away the second video. The aide reached out for the tablet, but she waved him away. “Can we get the live feed here?”

The man reached over her shoulder and, in an incongruous moment of levity in that moment of sadness and confusion, started arguing with LeFleur about how to bring up whatever she was looking for. Finally, she shook off the aide and handed him back the tablet. “HUD, bring up Sergeant Oren’s live helmet feed,” ordered LeFleur. “Connect and broadcast to Operations holo-projectors.”

A much larger three-dimensional image appeared in the middle of the operations room they were in.

“What’s this?” asked Morgan.

Ben, along with everyone else in the operations room, looked at live footage from an AIC soldier’s—Sergeant Oren’s—helmet camera.

“Site team Alpha Charlie is go. Discovery documentation one,” Oren said perfunctorily. “We’re here inside the remains of what’s believed to be a part of the UEF *Atlas*, a Dreadnought-class vessel,” said Oren.

It was a little hard to make out where in the ship Oren was, but Ben eventually figured it out. Through the light of the AIC soldier and the rest of his group, he made out the sick bay.

“It appears we’re outside the doors to the medical quarters of the *Atlas*. Fournier’s group before us already opened the doors. We’re going to proceed inside,” reported Oren. His light shone through a hole cut through the airtight doors to the sick bay.

Ben, like everyone else in the operations room, had his eyes glued to the video feed. He both hoped for and dreaded what this Oren would find.

Oren's light lit up the *Atlas* sick bay. Right away, there were floating dead bodies. From their uniforms it was clear they were UEF Navy. Ben expected that, but had held out some hope that maybe they were evacuated to the front third of the *Atlas*. His knowledge of the ship told him that it was possible to break the massive dreadnought up into three sections. The back section was where the main engines were housed. The middle section was mostly living quarters, training areas, and the docking bay. Lastly, the front section housed the command deck and the fold jump engines.

"It looks like we got some casualties here, Commander. I count about six or seven people—wait...there's something else here." Oren's camera showed something odd on the floor of the sick bay. Unlike the floating dead people, it was still, static, seemingly adhered to the floor.

"What is that?" asked LeFleur.

"Hold on, I'm gonna get a closer look." Oren made his way over to the mass on the floor, pushing various medical instruments and trays out of the way. Frozen globs of blood bounced off his helmet's visor.

Ben glanced over at Ace. With everyone focused on the video feed, no one was watching him or guarding their weapons. Morgan gave Ace a withering glance and a shake of her head. Ace rolled his eyes and returned his attention to the video feed. It was a good reminder to Ben that they needed to find a way out of this mess. And the more they were learning, the more he wanted to make that happen.

"I don't know... are you seeing this?" Oren stood over what was the frozen twisted carcass of several of the Shapeless, melded together. But none of them even knew what that was.

Four arms and five legs stuck out in unnatural directions from a central mass of frozen flesh and bone. There were three faces, mouths too big, screaming out in pain, forever frozen in horror. Everything else was just a mash of random body parts and organs.

"What in the hell...?" LeFleur leaned in closer to the video and squinted, as if that would make what she was seeing more understandable, but she couldn't comprehend it. No one in that operations room could.

Ben had seen one of the Oblivion aliens change shapes when the bombing had happened on the train, but he'd never seen anything like this. These must be the aliens in something approaching their natural form.

LeFleur noticed that Ben was staring blankly past the video feed at nothing. "Mr. Saito."

“Yeah?”

“Do you know what we’re looking at here?”

Everyone in the operations room looked Ben at the same time. They awaited his answer. He tried his best to come up with a reply, a truthful reply. “I’m not sure.”

“You’re not sure?” LeFleur asked. “Care to elaborate?”

“Well, I mean, I heard of...apparently the Oblivion cult, they believe in saviors from the stars that will unite humanity. But that’s it. Dunno anything about them, not really. I don’t know where they come from or what they really want.” That was mostly true. Ben held back some of his own personal experience, and that of Ace and Morgan. But if this was what the creatures really looked like, what they knew of the aliens was woefully inadequate.

“Holy hell,” Ace said.

“You gotta be shitting me,” Morgan added under her breath.

With their covert operations experience, they likely knew more of the facts of the Oblivion cult and their alien saviors than Ben did, but he doubted any of them had seen anything like this. They’d all come across the mention of the great “saviors.” They knew they weren’t just tall tales used to make the Oblivion belief systems more colorful, as many assumed, but it was still a shock to see the aliens.

LeFleur wasn’t convinced. “Saviors?”

“That’s what they call them.” Ben felt something that he hadn’t had since being on the *Perseverance*. With the discovery of these ‘savior’ creatures and his father’s mayday message, he had some leverage. At the very least, LeFleur needed him alive.

“There’s something else here, ma’am,” Oren said, somehow tearing his attention away from the grotesque creature in front of him. What caught his attention was one of the bodies floating around in the sick bay.

“Is that...?” LeFleur looked at the arm patch on the corpse Oren had focused on. It was of a rocket ship bisecting a circle. On one side, stars from space; on the other, the stars of the Allied Independent Colonies.

“It’s one of ours, ma’am,” confirmed Oren.

“How is this possible?” asked LeFleur, to no one in particular.

Ben looked around as LeFleur and her officers discussed how an AIC soldier could’ve been among the dead in the wreckage of the *Atlas*. None of them agreed on the circumstance in which that was possible. That,

combined with the attack on Magellan 5 and the AIC fighters out in the debris field, painted a confusing picture.

Ben suspected that for all her bravado, LeFleur would have to talk to her superiors back on Vassar-1.

This is my chance, my opening.

“I think I can help you find the *Atlas*,” offered Ben.

“What?” LeFleur asked.

“I think I know how to find my dad.”

ELEVEN

JAIME WASHBURN, mayor of Sanctuary Station 33, hadn't died in the initial attack. But he wished he had. God, did he wish he was dead.

Funny; as a dying man for so long, Washburn somewhat feared the end. He'd accepted the fact that he'd be jettisoned out into the cosmos to float for eternity in the cold silent darkness, but he was in no hurry.

Not anymore. Now, the end couldn't come fast enough.

Washburn was kept prisoner, but there were no cell bars. The room he was being kept in, once a supply closet, had its door ripped off. His guards were alien to him, some of the Shapeless who'd butchered the populace of his Sanctuary Station. A slow death from illness, eating him from the inside out, would be better than being savaged by one of those creatures.

"I'm bored, baby. You want to play a game?" Washburn's virtual holographic girlfriend, Anna, sat next to him on the floor. She was full of enthusiasm, blissfully unaware of the horrible reality of the situation. Washburn should probably just pause her or turn her off, but he couldn't quite bring himself to be alone with his thoughts.

When Washburn coughed, blood splattered on his cupped hand. His forced roommates and fellow prisoners noticed, but didn't comfort him. They didn't tell him it'd be okay or even think about getting him help. All of them, down to the man, were too busy being terrified of their own potential fates to care about his.

"You don't sound so good. Do you want me to call the doctor for you, baby? Maybe some chicken noodle soup from Pat's Deli or Dominic's? Or I can order you some medication through the network. Just say the word and we'll get you feeling right and ready!" Anna smiled at Washburn. She was

beautiful, but all Washburn saw was a woman sitting on the other side of Anna's semi-transparent holographic image. The woman had a massive head wound, fresh and caked blood covering her face. He couldn't tell if she had just passed out, or was dead.

How many days? How long have I been here? How long until the lack of meds does me in? Can't come soon enough.

Everything hurt. From the injuries Washburn had suffered from the initial attack on the observation deck to the ravages of his unchecked illness, the mayor was in serious pain. Each joint was swollen and ached. His head was a little cloudy from an unrelenting headache. One of his arms was broken, along with a couple of ribs.

"There is comfort in the dark. Warmth away from light..." Washburn heard singing in the hallway outside the supply closet cell. It was disturbingly joyous. Considering the situation and conditions, joy should've been nonexistent.

"Who's that?" asked Anna.

A bald woman's head poked out from the other side of the supply closet doorway. She looked young: maybe, in another life, beautiful. There was blood splatter on her face, and dark circles under her light blue eyes. Upon making eye contact, she smiled at Washburn, who coughed in return.

The bald woman entered the supply closet prison. She was dressed in raggedly all-black garb, and Washburn realized she was an Oblivion cultist. She casually walked over to him, swaying back and forth as she kept singing.

"Peace and love, acceptance in the Abyss. Come, find comfort in the dark, warmth away from the light, join the Abyss!" The woman stopped singing as soon as she was face to face with Washburn, only a couple of inches separating them.

"Baby? Who is this woman? Have you been seeing other people?" inquired Anna. The ones and zeroes of her programming turned her into the jealous girlfriend. It was a playful setting that Washburn had left on in another life and couldn't remember how to change anymore.

"Why hello, Mr. Mayor. Good morning!" said the woman brightly. There was craziness in her eyes, that shine of psychosis that was always foreboding.

"Get bent," replied Washburn.

The woman laughed. She laughed so hard it obviously hurt her throat, but she didn't seem to care.

"Quite the opposite, Mr. Mayor. This...this is the waiting room for paradise. But lucky you, your wait is over. Are you ready for heaven?"

"I'm ready to not ever have to talk to you again."

"Not much of a conversationalist, huh? That's okay." The woman held out her open hand. There was blood caked under her nails, her palm stained and dirty.

Do it. Let's get this over with.

Washburn grabbed the woman by her hand. She struggled a little bit, but managed to pull him up to his feet.

"Where are we going?" asked Anna as she glitched out for a second, then reappeared next to Washburn.

"Good. Now, let's go." The woman smiled and led Washburn towards the supply closet's exit.

What the hell are you? Washburn couldn't help but stare at the Shapeless at the entrance. Nothing about it was recognizable. What he saw was an undulating mass of flesh and teeth that defied any known categorization.

Washburn was led through halls he, of course, knew well. He was on the administrative level of the station. It was where he had his office, and where other high-ranking officials on site conducted their business. Plain walls on one side and wall-length windows on the other, it was always quiet. Even now, during the horrors on the station, it was quiet.

"Look at it. Do you see it?" asked the woman. She stopped, head turned towards the windows.

"See what?" asked Washburn in his weakening voice.

The woman pointed at the gigantic sphere of churning liquid metal outside Sanctuary Station 33. It spewed out smaller ships, some of them mimics of UEF or AIC fighters, and others completely foreign forms seemingly made up on the fly.

"Isn't it beautiful? Do you know what it is, Mr. Mayor?"

"No, but I'm sure you're eager to tell me."

"It's the future. Our future. Humanity's future. And the future is brilliant, it's..." The woman started to cry.

This woman is out of her damn mind.

Washburn decided to make a run for it. He spun around, jerking free of the woman, only to find one of the Shapeless following right behind them. The thing reached out and touched his shoulder.

TWELVE

WASHBURN FELL BACK as pain more intense than he'd ever felt in his life washed over him. Every muscle in his body spasmed. He was sure he'd pissed himself.

"Please don't do that," the woman said, standing over him, holding her hand out to help him up. He didn't even remember falling down.

He climbed up on unsteady legs.

"I hope I'm not boring you with all this," she said, as if nothing had happened. "I'm sorry, it's just so...perfect. Everything is just so perfect, and I'm excited for you. Really, I am. And a little jealous, if I'm being honest." The woman continued on down the hall, holding Washburn by his hand, dragging him along with her.

His HUD glitched, and for a moment he thought he heard Anna, but then she was gone. His internal electronics were fried, and he was alone in his mind.

This is it. Steel yourself, man.

Washburn could hear his father's voice in his head. He'd served four tours in the wars around his home colony, back before they'd submitted to AIC control. When the war finally came to their doorstep and the AIC invaded, his father had told eight-year-old Wash and his younger brother one thing before he'd walked out of their lives forever: *If you're ever captured, don't give them what they want. Keep the fear hidden deep inside. Meet your maker with dry eyes.*

Things got grimmer the further the woman led Washburn through the halls of his station.

The remnants of the massacre became more visible. Blood and body matter splattered the walls and carpets as Washburn and his crazed escort approached the communications room on the station's administrative level. He saw body parts and dead bodies left to rot in their mangled states. At one point he stepped on an actual eyeball, which made him swallow down bile in his mouth.

Washburn's heart threatened to burst out of his chest, it beat so hard. But on the outside, he kept it together. It was important to him to die with dignity. Not for his long-dead old man and his notions of manly strength, but because he'd made the promise to himself the day he was diagnosed with the cancer that was eating him alive.

Standing on both sides of the hallway was a ghoulish scene. Washburn and the woman passed rows of scared station residents shaking, crying, and praying to their gods. Some wet themselves; others were crumpled down into the fetal position asking for their mommies, despite being grown adults.

Standing across from the terrified station residents were Shapeless, one for every person. Each of the aliens did their best to mimic their scared captives. Their bodies formed into mirror images; not with smooth transitions, but they transformed nonetheless. They parroted every word, prayer, and cry that the humans made. The corpses of the people who must've served their purposes or hadn't cooperated piled up against the walls, producing an ungodly smell.

Washburn was surprised when he entered the communication room. He was convinced he was being led into an execution chamber, but found the space not only relatively clean, but also free of Shapeless. But there were scared staff that he knew well, manning the different stations and consoles.

"What is this?" asked Washburn.

The woman smiled and left Washburn in the Sanctuary Station 33 communications room. She practically skipped away, leaving him standing awkwardly in the room and sniffing and crying. He didn't move; he was too busy trying to process what he saw and what was happening.

"Mayor Washburn," said a deep voice that sounded vaguely familiar.

Washburn turned.

Standing there at the entrance to the communication rooms was Captain Lee Saito.

THIRTEEN

WASHBURN COULDN'T BELIEVE his eyes. He figured that almost everyone was killed during the massacre on his station. There was no reason to believe that anybody survived, much less the man who'd brought this nightmare to the station.

"I wish I could say that you look well," said Saito with an easy smile. Washburn noticed how immaculate the UEF captain looked. His hair was perfectly trimmed, as was his distinctive mustache. There wasn't a scratch on him, and it looked like he'd just taken a shower and gotten dressed in freshly-cleaned clothes.

"Captain Saito...?" Washburn still couldn't believe it. Seeing Saito just added to his confusion. Part of him wondered, *Is this all real? Maybe I'm already dead, or dying. If so, is this hell? And why am I greeted by Saito, of all people, upon entering hell?*

"No, I assure you, this is real. And you're not dead yet, my friend." Saito's smile didn't leave his face. "No one really dies, not anymore.

"Now, I know you are in a pretty narrow, is that right? Narrow spot? Or wide spot? Or...help me out here, Mr. Mayor. Your language, it's new to me. So many sayings, it's very confusing."

"A tight spot," answered a bewildered Washburn.

"That's right, a tight spot. Thank you. I realize you're in a tight spot. This is your station, right? You govern this place?"

"You know I do. We've met, remember? Not too long ago. We took your ship in, gave your men food, shelter." Washburn was confused. The answer was obvious, but his vision was less than clear.

The human mind can only take so much, Wash thought. When confronted, assaulted by those things far beyond its understanding, it could shut down. He must be reaching that point. This couldn't really be happening.

"Sorry." Saito's expression didn't change; he just kept smiling. It was unsettling. "I have some...blank spots in my memory. I know I'll eventually be able to fill them, but this process, it takes time."

"What process?" Wash said, but he figured he already knew. He'd seen the evidence of this everywhere. This wasn't Saito. This was one of *them*.

"Anyway, let's move on to why you're here. I need your help, Mr. Mayor."

"My help? With what?" Suddenly it was as if all the horror around Washburn was washed away. Everything, briefly, felt normal.

"Directions. You see, I'm not, what's the word I'm looking for? I'm not, uh..."

"Familiar?"

"Yes! Thank you!" Saito pointed at his head. "Blank spots, remember? I'm not familiar with this part of space. Where exactly are we, where your station is?"

"We're on the edge of AIC space. Section 432, to be exact. Why?" Washburn was about to find sanctuary in conversation, but it was broken by the sounds of someone screaming just outside the communication room, then loud screeching. Just like that, he was back in the nightmare.

"And how would we get to the capitol planet? What's it called again?"

"Vassar-1." As Washburn answered, he felt a new presence in the communications room. He saw two people, what looked like people, enter, but it was fairly clear to him that they weren't normal. Their bodies herked and jerked violently; their legs wobbled. It was as if they were walking for the first time.

"How do we get to Vassar-1 from here?" That smile, that unnerving smile, it appeared to get wider. It didn't falter, even as he talked.

"I dunno, look in the nav systems. It's not that hard. Why do you wanna know how to get to Vassar-1?" Washburn asked.

"Nothing for you to worry about. Nothing at all. Well, thank you for your help, Mr. Mayor. You can go—oh wait, the codes, what are the codes to access the station's system?"

"Zero, five, x-ray, alpha, nine."

“Thank you. You can go.” Saito turned from Washburn. He walked over to one of the staff members sitting in front of the navigation console. Like the rest, they didn’t move, not until Saito put his hand on their shoulder and whispered instructions. The crew member let out a blood-curdling screech, then turned on their monitor and got to work.

“Ooookay.” Washburn backed away. He was about to turn to leave the communications room when he backed up into something large, solid.

“One last thing, Mr. Mayor. Just in case we need you going forward.” Saito looked up from the staff member whom he’d instructed to look up Vassar-1 in the navigation system.

Washburn felt something prick his neck; then he felt the sudden rush of blood filling his mouth. It was hard, no, impossible to breathe and to swallow. Blood spilled out from between his lips and he felt the very life start to rapidly leave his body.

Washburn fell down to the floor, holding his throat. He pressed his hands against the gaping wound that bisected his Adam’s apple. Looking up from the ground, where he was dying, he saw one of the Shapeless standing over him. Its whole body was changing, transforming from a churning mass of random bone and flesh into none other than the spitting image of himself.

SAITO LOOKED DOWN AT WASHBURN, bleeding out on the floor. He wanted to tell him that everything would be all right. He was reborn now, good as new. Better than new. A disease-free Washburn stood before him.

“Has anyone figured out how to use this place’s intercom?” asked the new Washburn.

“I worked over here,” answered one of the Shapeless, masquerading as a station staff member.

He held up a bloody HUD disc. Saito’s human memories told him that these were implanted into the base of every human’s skull when they were children. This one looked to have been extracted rather crudely.

“Very good. Thank you.” Saito took the HUD disc and placed it in his open palm. Wires formed out of his skin and plugged into the disc so he

could gain access. “Fascinating. Primitive, but fascinating. Let’s see if this works.”

The other Shapeless all watched Saito intently as he tapped into and prepared to use the station’s intercom.

“Attention, any surviving residents of Sanctuary Station 33. This is Captain Lee Saito of the UEF *Atlas*.” Saito smiled. “I hope my message finds you well.”

FOURTEEN

“THAT CAN’T BE.” Ada sat up in the apartment bed, which she shared with Francesca as they watched bad reality TV. Like everyone else in their shelter, the sound of Saito’s voice definitely caught their attention.

“What? Who is that?” asked Francesca.

Ada jumped out of the bed and hurried into the apartment’s shared space. Rollins, Tanisha, and Tomas all stood in the middle of the room, listening in various states of shock.

“I come to you on behalf of your Mayor Washburn, who is indisposed at the moment,” Saito continued. “Now, I know you all must be scared, and probably hesitant to trust me or anyone else at this moment. It’s understandable. But I assure you that everything is fine...” Saito droned on.

“How did he survive?” asked Tanisha. “I mean, he was, we all saw it, he walked out there, unarmed. There’s no way.”

“I don’t know. The old man’s one tough son of a bitch. Did you see him on the *Atlas*? He did go toe-to-toe with those things.” Tomas, like Tanisha, had never talked to Saito; but unlike her, he’d fought alongside him.

“So did Ada and Jake,” Tanisha said.

“Ada? You okay?” asked Rollins.

Everything from the tone of Saito’s voice to his cadence was completely off. It was obviously one of *them*.

Ada shook with fury. It was bad enough when it was the men and women of the *Atlas*. Then, she’d watched them do it to some poor little girl; now, they’d done it to Saito. He’d had his faults, but she and the captain had stood side-by-side while they’d fought the damn things off. Maybe

something had gone wrong with him in the end, but he still deserved better than this.

“I’m fine,” answered Ada.

“You know that’s not him, right?”

Ada realized she was crying. She wiped away the tears. “I’m not crying because I’m sad. I’m crying because I’m so goddamned angry,” she seethed. Ada’s fists were clenched so hard they drew blood from her palms.

Over the speakers, the droning voice of imposter Saito seemed to be drawing to a conclusion. “... Finally, if you try and hide, we *will* find you, and you don’t want that. So if you would all be so kind as to meet me and my friends in the cafeteria, we’ll make your transition easy. Try and remember, death is nothing to be scared of. Just the opposite, in fact. Death is the beginning of something better: it’s freedom, it’s acceptance, it’s unity, it is happiness.”

The station’s intercom went silent.

Rollins placed a friendly hand on Ada’s back and rubbed it in an attempt to calm her down. It didn’t work.

“What do you want to do?” he asked.

“There’s nothing we can do, right?” Francesca said from the hallway. “We just got to wait here and pray for rescue, right? All we have to do is stay alive.”

“Oh, there’s plenty we can do,” Tomas said.

Ada glanced over at him and saw the same fury in his eyes that she felt. Her training told her to channel that anger. To be smart. To select the proper strategy.

She told that part of her mind to screw off.

“You heard ‘em. We can be so kind as to meet them in the cafeteria. We can make their transition easy for them,” Ada said. “We can give them freedom, unity, and goddamned happiness.”

FIFTEEN

“THOSE BASTARDS! THEY TOOK ‘EM ALL!” Ace was beside himself. He checked under his seat in *Lost*’s cockpit. “They even took my little three-shooter!”

“It’s part of the deal, Ace. We’re not in cuffs; in return, we help them find the *Atlas*,” Ben said as he checked the levels and instruments inside the ship.

“Sounds like a terrible deal.”

“Would you rather be back in the brig or have a pistol in your hand?”

“I’d rather have the pistol,” Ace said.

“Of course he’d rather have the pistol,” mumbled Morgan. “Look, we may not have any firearms, but the ship is still armed. There’s no way they found the pop guns.”

Ace got strangely excited. “You think so?”

“I know so. We got guns, we got our ship.”

“What else do we need?” Ben said.

“A way to actually find the ship,” said Morgan.

“Ah, yup. There’s that.” Ben sat down in his captain’s chair. “Would you believe me if I told you I told them the truth?”

“No, because I’m not an idiot,” replied Morgan. She conducted her own checks on the piloting instruments.

Ben had to chuckle. “Fair enough.”

“So you have a plan?” asked Morgan.

“I do. And it doesn’t involve helping these pricks find anything.”

“Is it as good as your last plan? Because that worked out great!” Ace said.

“Better. I promise,” Ben said, although he suspected that Ace would call him a liar after it was all said and done. Then again, he was probably going to do that anyway.

Morgan had only two more piloting procedures to go through before she was done. “You gonna share with the group?”

“Well, for starters, I have another way to find the *Atlas*. Yes, I told them that I knew their fold engine signature and could track the trail of anti-matter left behind by it, which is true. But I gave them the wrong engine signature information.”

“And you have the right one?” Ace asked.

“I do, and I already prepared for this before we left Earth. Morgan, would you be so kind as to reach under your pilot console?” Ben, pleased with his own cleverness, leaned back in his captain’s chair.

Morgan gave Ben a suspicious look. She did as he asked and pulled up a palm-sized oblong device.

“What in the world is this?” asked Morgan as she examined the small grey box in her hand.

“It’s something I had a student physicist back at Annapolis make for me,” answered Ben.

“When?”

“After things went to shit, but before they *really* went to shit.”

“That narrows it down,” Ace said.

“It doesn’t matter. What does is that it works—I think. Toss it over here,” Ben motioned for Morgan to throw him the little grey box, and she did.

“You think?” asked Ace.

“Well, yeah. I haven’t like, tested it or anything, but she said its design was gonna let her graduate early. So, I mean, I’m confident.” Ben entered the *Atlas*’ fold jump engine signature. It was nothing more than a number, but he was good with numbers. “Annnnnnd there we go. We’re all set. Now we just gotta wait for—”

Ben was interrupted after attaching the grey box to his captain’s chair by the sound of someone walking up the *Lost*’s ramp. Everyone in the cockpit went silent, trying to appear like they weren’t up to anything devious. It had the opposite effect. Luckily, the AIC officer who popped his head into their cockpit was young, inexperienced, and a little nervous.

“Is everything set here?” he asked.

He looked around the cockpit quickly. Ben knew he was supposed to be looking for anything out of the ordinary; but seeing that he'd never been in anything like the *Lost's* cockpit before, everything probably looked a little strange. So, if everything was strange, nothing was.

"We're all set for launch," Ben said, all business. He had the grey box in his hands, but it was far too inconspicuous to raise an issue.

Sure enough, the young officer just nodded. "Good. Good. I'll inform the captain and you'll be underway."

The *Lost* was on a circular landing/launch pad inside the *Perseverance's* docking bay. It was activated, slowly turning the small ship in the right direction, out towards the plasma shield that separated the inside of the dreadnought from open space.

"Crew of the *Lost*, this is *Perseverance* flight control. You have been cleared for launch. Commence launch in t-minus two minutes," said a voice from flight control through the cockpit radio.

"Okay, spin up those fold engines," ordered Ben. His plan was a simple boosted launch, as they used to call it in the UEF Navy. Used when retreating from a dying dreadnought or spaceship carrier, a boosted launch meant that the ship quickly used traditional means to leave the docking bay and immediately fold jumped upon hitting space. It would be too fast for the *Perseverance's* nearspace cannons to track them and shoot them down, which meant it was certainly too fast for fighters to intercept. In theory, they should've been home free. Plus, they could set their jump coordinates just outside where they'd tracked the *Atlas's* engine signature to.

"Crew of the *Lost*, this is flight control. Launch in five, four, three..."

Morgan's hand tightened on the flight stick. Ace put on his mag bracelets. Ben sweated and fidgeted nervously. Partly it was the boosted launch. It was a risk. Morgan was clearly quite capable, but it would require some quick adjustments.

The bigger thing worrying Ben was simply what he was going to find on the other side.

"Two, one, launch!" instructed flight control.

"Launch," echoed Ben.

Morgan brought the *Lost* up off the landing/launch pad and slowly hovered out towards the plasma shield. Once they reached it, she accelerated her way out of the *Perseverance*. Seconds after emerging, the fold engines were activated, and the small ship disappeared.

Ben made a point to always close his eyes through the whole bending-time-and-space portion of a fold jump. In fact, most people did. There were stories of pilots and officer crews looking out the observation windows and seeing the mind-twisting reality of manipulating reality, and losing it. That, combined with the oppressive g-forces, just made him nauseous.

When he opened his eyes, he instantly regretted it. The *Lost* had made its fold jump.

A wall of AIC fighters was lined up in a row, seemingly waiting for them to arrive.

SIXTEEN

“ANY MORE CLEVER PLANS, *CAPITÁN?*” Ace said sarcastically.

Ben resisted the urge to point how he’d yet to come up with anything remotely helpful since they’d left Earth.

“I second that,” Morgan said. “Minus the douchiness. If you have an idea, now’s the time.” Her artificial eyes scanned the intimidating force before them.

“What the hell is that?” Ben looked past the fighters to a large orb of living, churning liquid metal on the other side of the space station.

“Not so much a plan as a question,” Ace said, but his voice trailed off. He too was mesmerized by it. “That’s...never seen anything like that before,” he said at last.

“We’ve got bigger problems,” Morgan snapped. Ben assumed she was talking about the fighters, but she was pointing to the display from their rear cameras.

A huge AIC dreadnought, surrounded by a pair of cruisers, folded into space directly behind them.

The *Perseverance* had tracked them.

Instantly, as if they’d been primed to launch on arrival, dozens of fighters spewed forth from the dreadnought.

They initially converged on the *Lost*, which, Ben felt, justified his hunch that they must’ve put some kind of tracking device on the *Lost* while it was docked.

And why not? Ben suddenly felt very, very dumb that he hadn’t thought of that. He would’ve done the same thing if their positions had been reversed.

The fighters soon came to a halt in space, midway between the *Perseverance* and the *Lost*.

Ben figured that LeFleur and the AIC were talking to the other AIC fighters. Beyond the row of fighters, and next to the churning liquid metal orb that drew so much attention, sat a large, asymmetrical space station. It must be the eponymous Sanctuary Station 33.

“What’s going on? Why haven’t they blown us into space dust?” asked Ace.

“I dunno,” answered Morgan.

“Best-case scenario? They aren’t actually on the same side.”

“In case you didn’t notice, they’re AIC fighters,” Ace said.

“Maybe, maybe not. Maybe they’re stolen. Could be pirates,” Ben offered. He wasn’t sure if he believed himself, but the way that LeFleur had reacted earlier made him think she genuinely didn’t expect other AIC ships in action.

“Best-case scenario, the two sides start fighting and we can slip away.” Ben tensely kept switching his attention back and forth from the windows in the cockpit to the rearview cameras, and back again.

“And the worst-case scenario?” Ace asked.

“Pretty much the same as the best-case scenario, but we die in the crossfire. All I know is, we need to be ready to move and move fast.”

“Got it,” agreed Morgan.

Suddenly a group of the fighter ships guarding the station sped past the *Lost* towards the *Perseverance*. That was met with aggression in response. In a matter of seconds, fire erupted between the two sides and the fight was on.

“Get us outta this shit!” ordered Ben as spaceborne missiles and superheated plasma rounds flew by them. A couple of energy particles smashed the hull.

“Way ahead of you, Cap,” Morgan said, instantly diving straight downwards, as if she was hoping to go under the fighting, then take refuge in the dark behind the space station.

Morgan’s plan was sound, but the *Lost*’s attempted flight from the battle was noticed. Two AIC fighters broke out of the main engagement and dove after them. It was hard to tell which side they belonged to. In fact, Ben wondered how anyone in the intensifying space battle knew who was who.

“I’m having a little trouble shaking them. Those fighters. They’re a lot faster and more agile than this piece of junk,” Morgan said as the ship’s shields took hit after hit. She was right. With nothing but open space between them and the station ahead of them, they were at a severe disadvantage.

Then Ben had an idea. It was a crazy idea, a long shot, but it was better than nothing. “Don’t try to shake them.”

“What?” Morgan asked.

“Turn us around and fight.”

“I like the sentiment,” Ace said from behind Ben, “but how’s that going to work?”

“We only have the boom sticks,” Morgan said. Her apprehension was understandable. The only weapons the AIC hadn’t stripped in the *Perseverance*’s docking bay were flak guns. Firing high-speed superheated baseball-sized chunks of steel, they were very effective at close range, mostly used to breach lifeless ships. But they had their limits, and against the long-, mid-, and short-range capabilities of fighters, those limitations only became more pronounced.

“Transfer power to the forward shields and get in close,” Ben said. “Then we shred those bastards.”

“That’s it? That’s your plan?” Ace said.

“I thought you were tired of running away.”

“I’m good with fighting if you have an actual plan.”

“Do it, Morgan,” Ben said.

Morgan looked skeptical, but one hard turn later and the *Lost* barreled straight towards the two fighters that pursued it.

“The shields…” Morgan kept track of the shields’ power meters as she piloted the *Lost* towards the fighters, who must’ve thought it was time to play space chicken and flew straight towards them. As shown by the rapidly descending numbers, their only protection was almost at its limit.

Beyond the muzzle flashes from the oncoming fighters, Ben could see the battle raging above. The bright orange, yellow, and white streaks from bullets and missiles flew in every direction. Some hit, evidenced by little explosions. Most missed, or collided with shields. Thirty nearspace defensive cannons on the *Perseverance* did most of the heavy-duty fighting, targeting the mystery fighters protecting the space station and easily

blowing them to bits. Slowly that huge orb of churning liquid metal, easily twice as big as the station and the dreadnought, moved closer.

“Keep it steady. We’ll be okay.” Ben by no means thought that they’d be okay. The shields were almost depleted. His plan might take out one of the fighters, but taking out both of them would take superhuman piloting and/or a minor miracle.

And the man with one arm and one leg didn’t put much stock in miracles.

SEVENTEEN

“CAP?... BEN?” Morgan was nervous. Ben had never seen her nervous before.

“A few more seconds. Keep her steady.” Ben wanted to wait until he was right on top of the fighters. The closer the better. Once they were maybe three or four seconds away from impact, he gave the order. “Fire!”

Morgan opened up on the fighters. One of them barrel-rolled out of the way of the super-hot shrapnel being fired their way. The other took the brunt of the attack. Unfortunately for whomever or whatever was piloting it, there was genuine logic to Ben’s plan.

Shields, made of the same but slightly-adjusted plasma as those found in ship and station docking bays, had a weakness. Yes, they were great at deflecting kinetic fire or any direct attack. That worked through the shielding system automatically detecting and redeploying energy to the section of the shield that was going to deflect the projectile. A flak gun circumvented that by having multiple projectiles, impacting in multiple locations at almost the same time.

Of course, that on its own wasn’t enough to defeat modern shielding. With enough time and distance, the shielding could still adapt. That was why they had to be so close. Besides the fact that the weapons would only be effective at short range, anyway, being this close made it impossible for the shielding system to compensate in time.

Not that it didn’t try. And for a moment, Ben thought it wasn’t going to work. The shield managed to pick off several of the largest bits of incoming shrapnel.

But one good chunk and a little luck were all they needed. A piece that made it through the fighter's shielding ripped through the ship's engine assembly and, within seconds, ignited the fuel and blew the vessel up. It would have been worth celebrating but for the fact that there was one fighter left.

"What do we do now? We're basically out of shield!" pointed out Morgan.

Each option that ran through Ben's head was worse than the one before. He finally reached a conclusion. It was another long shot, but that seemed to be all that was left. "Make a run for the station."

Morgan frowned. "Why—"

"The docking bay," he said. "It's a shot."

Morgan snapped the nose of the ship over and mashed on the thrusters. "You know they shouldn't be open, right?"

"They could be."

"But in these battle conditions? The first thing they should do is close that bay."

Ben blew out his cheeks. "Let's hope somebody forgot."

"That's your plan?" Ace said.

"We're all waiting for yours," Ben offered. "And since it would be your first, I can't wait to hear it."

Ben, Morgan, and Ace all got pushed back in their seats from the g-forces as the *Lost* went as fast as it could without falling apart.

The *Lost* did feel and sound like it was going to fall apart. Forget the orange streaks of superheated impactors that flew by like small comets; the whole ship shook, almost vibrating, violently. Ben and Ace looked at each other, both clearly concerned, but they silently agreed to stay on course.

"I don't know how much more of this she can take." Morgan struggled to keep her hold on the stick. The vibrations from it traveled up her arm to the rest of her body.

"Just keep at it, Morgan. She'll make it."

Morgan glanced over at him. "I'd buy that more if I thought you actually knew what you were talking about."

Since Ben didn't have nearly the time in the ship that Morgan did, or Ace for that matter, it was a valid point. "I have a good feeling," he said, not even convincing himself.

"That makes one of us," Ace said.

“Where’s this damn docking bay?” Morgan said aloud as they approached.

They’d reached Sanctuary Station 33, but couldn’t find a way inside. Then their shields finally gave out.

EIGHTEEN

THE FIGHTER PURSUING the *Lost* fired, aiming at the ship's left wing and the engines on it. It hit its mark. After a small explosion of fuel, smoke trailed out behind it. Smoke in zero gravity looked fascinating, but there was nothing fascinating about it to the crew.

"Shit!" yelled Morgan as the stick threatened to jerk out of her hand. If she'd had trouble piloting the ship before, it was near impossible now. They needed to drastically slow down so she could reconfigure the vessel to fly with only one wing. The problem was, the fighter was still in pursuit.

Ben saw the writing on the wall. This was it; this was the end. Loud clanging noises filled the cockpit of the *Lost*. They came from more rounds hitting the ship. Eventually they'd hit the main fuel tank and the whole thing, including the crew inside, was going to go up in flames.

Ben's father had had a whole speech for him about good deaths and bad deaths when he'd first enlisted. The old man and his damn speeches. Ben's response had been a joke about no death, and to ask if this speech had been vetted by his mom.

But the joke was on Ben. His mother was dead, and there was nothing good about it. The old man might be dead, too. And here he was.

Good enough for you, old man?

Ben reached into his jacket pocket. Inside was an old-fashioned physical photograph. It was of him, his mother, and his father on the boardwalk. His dad had the same picture, as had his mom; they'd asked for three copies. He just remembered that day as the happiest of his life.

"Holy shit, you seeing this?"

Morgan's voice cut through Ben's fatalistic haze. He looked out the windows of the *Lost's* cockpit. The fighter that had been following them was gone. He could just see the thruster burn as it rushed back toward what was left of the fight.

But there was nothing left. The *Perseverance* was in its death throes.

The large orb of churning liquid metal had gotten close to the *Perseverance*. The front of the ship was being absorbed by it, even as the dreadnought focused all its fire.

The huge ship rattled, and her energy died, pitching the entire ship into darkness. The silhouette would have been lost if not for the cannons along her hull. The autocannons, built to use reserve power, kept firing, creating an eerie glow that outlined the edges.

But not for long. The orb kept coming, seemingly growing outwardly as it enveloped the ship.

After a few moments, it was over. The dreadnought was gone, completely consumed by the glowing orb.

Large spikes jutted out from the large orb so fast that there was no dodging them. They easily pierced through the hulls of fighters that tried to make desperate runs at the enemy. The cruisers that had been flanking the dreadnought tried to retreat, but the spikes kept growing now, jutting further and further into space from the orb. They pierced the hulls of the cruisers, breaking them in half along their superstructures as if they were made of brittle clay. In less than a minute, the whole of the AIC force was gone.

The orb rippled, its metallic surface reflecting the nothingness left around it in space, except a handful of fighters that Ben assumed were part of the force that had been here to greet them when they'd first jumped here.

"That was amazing in a sort of messed-up way," Ace said. "Mostly because it wasn't us."

"Yet," Morgan said.

"Can you maneuver this thing?" asked Ben, still struggling to believe what he'd just seen. LeFleur had chased him here, and now she and her whole crew were surely dead.

"Enough," she said, still struggling to hold the controls. From what Ben knew of the control surface, she was practically flying the ship sideways to keep moving lazily along the side of the station.

"We need to find this docking bay."

They all scanned along the station. It was strangely dark.

After thirty seconds, Ace said, “Has anyone seen a single light coming from anywhere?”

“Nope,” Ben said.

Morgan shook her head. “I just want to find that docking bay.”

“Any port in a storm,” Ben said.

“Especially one that just ate an AIC battle group,” Ace said.

A little less than two minutes later, Morgan spotted the open docking bay on Sanctuary Station 33. Like the rest of the station, it was dark, but it was open. And that was all they needed.

If they’d known what they were flying into, that opinion might have changed.

NINETEEN

“ARE YOU SEEING THIS?” asked Ada. Her nose was mere centimeters from the windows of the survivors’ apartment refuge. Out in space, she saw the battle between the Shapeless’ ships and a newly arrived AIC fleet.

“Who do you think that is?” asked Rollins as he joined Ada at the window. The rest of the survivors—Tomas, Francesca, Tanisha, and Walter—all followed.

“Is it a rescue party?” Francesca asked hopefully.

“Whoever it is, it looks like they’re losing,” said Tomas.

“It’s an opportunity!” Ada said, jumping down. She was actually excited by the battle going on outside. “They’re distracted. This might be our only shot to get to that engineering supply room and get those damn flamethrowers and cold-cast guns.”

“She’s right,” agreed Tomas. “Those things are probably too worried about whoever that is out there that they’re fighting with to look for us.”

“That’s a mighty big ‘probably’. What if you’re wrong?” Walter wasn’t a natural pessimist, but he had a point. That would be a hell of a gamble, making a raid on the engineering supply room. They couldn’t get there via the vents, so they’d have to run out in the open, and more than likely run into some Shapeless on the way there and back.

“We don’t have a choice,” Ada said. “If we’re going to take the fight back to these things and maybe, just maybe find someone—a ship out there to come rescue us—or rescue ourselves, we need weapons. Extreme heat and extreme cold, that’s all that works against these things. It’s worth the risk.”

“Ada and I will go. Tanisha too,” Tomas said. Like Ada, he was tired of waiting around. “Walter, sorry, but you’re out for this one. Francesca, too.”

“We must be too young,” Walter said, winking at Francesca. Humor in crisis; that seemed to be the Walter way, Ada thought.

“You stay back, too, Rollins,” Ada said, nodding at his hand.

“Bullshit,” he said, giving her the finger with his other hand. “Only need one to hold a pulse blaster.”

“I don’t like us splitting up,” Ada said. “But I like it a lot less if Walter and Francesca are back here alone.” She stared Rollins down. He outranked her here, so it was his call in the end, but she knew she was right. Someone who knew how to shoot a gun needed to stay back with Walter and Francesca.

“Fine,” Rollins said, frustration written on his face. “But don’t get dead out there,” he said to Ada.

“That’s the plan,” Ada said.

After taking a quick inventory of weapons, Ada, Tomas, and Tanisha took off their shoes and boots so that they made less sound through the halls. Tomas and Ada had their combat flak jackets to wear. Tanisha found the thickest jacket she could and put it on. It had a metallic liner that might impede a Shapeless alien’s claws.

Lastly, they laid out their remaining weapons. There were two standard-issue rifles proven non-effective when it came to killing the aliens, though sometimes they were effective when it came to slowing them down. Tomas and Tanisha took the rifles. Ada had a pistol with one mag loaded and only a single extra mag. She took two white phosphorous grenades that should come in handy; she also took the only industrial-strength welding torch, which was fashioned very much like an old-fashioned flamethrower.

Armed and ready to go, they bypassed the front door and instead headed over to climb up to the janitor’s office/supply room so they could sneak their way out into the commercial level of Sanctuary Station 33. It was a risky path, but exposing their hiding place was riskier.

Tomas was first. He jumped, grabbed the edges of the hole, and pulled himself up. Once there he held his arm out, and helped pull Tanisha up to join him.

“You sure about this, Ada?” asked Rollins. He’d insisted on following them as far as he could.

Ada slung the welding torch over her shoulder. “No. But I’m sure we have to try. Otherwise we’re just sitting ducks here.”

“Okay,” Rollins said, running his hand through his hair. Ada found it an endearing tic. She’d grown to like the commander quite a bit in the short time she’d known him. “But make me a promise, Private Ericsson.”

To Ada, he looked like a man saying his final goodbyes. “Sure, Commander Rollins,” she said, ignoring Tomas, whose hand stuck down through the hole from the office above.

“Come back,” Rollins said. “Come back alive.”

Ada smiled, knowing she couldn’t promise anything of the sort. Rollins must know it as well as she. “Of course. We’ll be back before you know it.”

Rollins nodded and stepped back. “Good. Because the old man and the kid are gonna drive me nuts.”

Ada smiled back one last time, then took Tomas’ hand and was pulled up into the janitor’s office.

She looked at the open vent that she’d traveled through seemingly countless times before. Part of her missed the safety it provided. Another part of her didn’t miss the confined space one bit.

“I’ll take point,” whispered Ada. She may not have been a soldier very long, but she had the most experience when it came to navigating the station. Very slowly, she opened the door, careful not to make a sound.

Ada looked left down the quiet halls of the commercial level. Other than the now-rotting bodies of victims caught in the initial Shapeless assault, it was empty. She held her breath as she looked right. Again, other than the vestiges of the earlier slaughter, nothing.

“C’mon,” instructed Ada in a whisper as she fully opened the door. The business end of the welding torch led the way as she stepped out into the Sanc-33 commercial-level hallways.

This was a dangerous route to go. Each level of the sanctuary station was about 3 to 5 km round trip. On one end she knew there was the main cafeteria, where the fake Saito had called for a gathering of the station survivors, probably—no, most certainly—to murder them and take their identities in the most brutal way possible. The only upside was that unlike the vents that cut through everything, going on foot to the cafeteria would’ve taken at least twenty minutes. Chances were, they weren’t going to run into that group of monsters.

Tomas and Tanisha followed Ada out into the hallways. Everything seemed good at first. They tried to move as quickly as they could while staying quiet. The lack of shoes helped, though at one point each of them separately stepped in the blood and juices of decaying flesh.

Ada quickly held up her hand in a closed fist. Immediately Tomas and Tanisha stopped. They knew exactly what that meant. She'd spotted a Shapeless alien who'd wandered out of the convenience store up ahead of them, about forty yards away.

Judging by the oblivious nature of the Shapeless, Ada knew it hadn't detected them yet. In fact, she didn't really know how they sensed people or the world around them. Did they see, hear, smell, and touch? Or was it something else? However they perceived their surroundings, the monster didn't sense them yet. That meant she had a brief window before it did.

Ada took action. Maybe it was her anger or even her fear, but whatever did propel her, she ran towards the Shapeless. She had two choices that she had to make in a split second: did she wait to get close enough and risk the monster screeching and calling out to the others? Or did she take a risk and fire on the alien with her pistol, stun it, and then get close enough to take the welding torch to it?

The Shapeless made the choice easy for her when it turned to face her.

TWENTY

IN THE BLINK OF AN EYE, Ada whipped out her pistol and unloaded on the Shapeless alien. She didn't slow as she approached; her sock-clad feet slid across the floor towards it and it suddenly occurred to her that she should really be barefoot if she actually wanted better traction. It was too late now for logic, though. The moment she was within range, she lit the monster on fire.

Unfortunately, she didn't consider that lighting one of those things alive might make it screech.

The burning alien's screeches echoed throughout the halls of the commercial level. Those were followed by almost a half a dozen more; it was hard to tell for sure. It really didn't matter how many there were. More than one Shapeless was scary enough.

Ada had to think fast. Her last decision wasn't the best one, but she'd felt like she had no options. This time, though, she did have some. She could've chosen the safest route and simply retreated back to the apartment, or they could've taken the vents. It would've limited some of the weapons they took with them: the rifles and welding torch would have had to go. There simply wasn't enough room. Or they could have run across the nearby promenade and taken the stairs down a couple levels to where the engineering armory was.

"What do we do?" asked a panicked Tanisha.

"Follow me, and no matter what you see, do *not* stop running!" Ada sprinted towards the cafeteria. Tomas and Tanisha fell in right behind her.

Two Shapeless aliens stood in the middle of the cafeteria, on alert from the sound of their fellow monster being burned alive. Ada ignored them, as

did Tomas, but Tanisha couldn't. She made the mistake of looking, and she froze.

"Grimes!" shouted Tomas, coming to a halt. "We need to keep going!"

Tanisha had never seen combat. She'd signed up for the UEF Navy's culinary program for a good reason. She had no interest in combat. She needed the education but didn't have the money to pay for it herself, and saw an opportunity for guaranteed job placement afterwards. So what if she'd have to be aboard a dreadnought, fighter carrier, or frigate for a couple years? Until she'd come aboard the *Atlas*, she'd never held a gun or seen death with her own two eyes.

Tears rolled down Tanisha's cheeks from her wide-open eyes. They stared at the same dead little girl Ada had seen earlier when she was in the vents.

"It's just a...just a child. How could they...?"

Two months. Tanisha was two months away from graduation from the UEF Navy Culinary Program. She'd served her time, and in two months she was going to be helped finding a job at an actual restaurant. Two months, and she would've been spared the sight of eviscerated children and the rotting dead.

Tomas practically tackled Tanisha as he slammed into her. "Move!" he screamed into her face, breaking through her thoughts. She stared at him in a daze as he practically yanked her off her feet.

Ada noticed that her two fellow survivors weren't right behind her. She turned around, feet sliding on the cheap linoleum floors. Once she did, she saw Tomas trying to drag Tanisha away, the latter of whom was clearly in shock.

Tanisha watched as one of the Shapeless slowly, grotesquely transformed themselves into the dead little girl. The excess matter fell off and began to sizzle and steam on the promenade floor. Tomas slung his rifle over his shoulder and chest and grabbed the cook with both his hands and physically, literally dragged her away.

"I know it's horrible, but we need to keep moving. If we stop, one of those things will kill us, and they'll be pretending to *be* us." Ada talked as she took one of the white phosphorus grenades off her belt. She pulled the pin and pressed the button on top to arm it. Then she tossed it at the two Shapeless in the promenade.

"Should we abort?" asked Tomas.

Ada didn't even wait to watch the two screeching Shapeless aliens burn. "No. We can still get downstairs to engineering. The stairs are just down here." She led the way down the halls, only a little more carefully than before.

The stairwell was never a good option, not even where there was no other option. Ada knew that. She'd been down them before.

When chaos had erupted in the station, people looked for the nearest exit. There wasn't time to wait for the elevators, so the stairs were the next best option. The only problem was that everyone had the same idea. And where were they really going, anyway?

"What's that smell?" asked Tanisha as Ada's small group approached the entrance to the closest stairwell.

The group was all too familiar with the smell of death. Their time on the least-effective sanctuary station ever had forced them to cozy up to it. With that said, the aroma coming from the stairwell was on a different level.

"You sure this is the only way?" Tomas got wise to what was probably behind those doors. It might have been the smears of blood that clued him in.

"I'm sure. Now..." Ada grabbed the door handle. "This is gonna be really bad. Like, all of this death you've seen, it's gonna all be in one place. You should probably use your shirts or something, cover your noses and mouths." She was about to open the door before turning back to Tomas and Tanisha. "Maybe try to hold your breath. Ready?"

Neither Tomas nor Tanisha was ready. But after they heard the sound of Shapeless screeches coming from both directions, they figured whatever was in that stairwell wasn't worse than a likely vicious death.

Ada opened the door, and immediately the smell made every other odor they'd run across on the dying station seem like the sweetest potpourri by comparison.

Tanisha threw up in a millisecond. Tomas didn't, at least not right away; but after a few steps, it got the better of him, and he couldn't stop himself from spewing vomit.

Ada managed to fight back the bile rising up her throat, but just barely. She tried to just concentrate on making it through the carnage.

The first step onto the pile of bodies that covered the stairs was the hardest. Human legs and feet weren't meant to walk on squishy surfaces. That was only made harder when the squish came from human bodies.

Bones, blood, and feces all mixed together in a toxic swirl in the massacre inside the stairwell.

There were bodies stacked on bodies. Blood covered the walls. Not an inch of the actual physical steel stairs was visible. It was a slaughterhouse, one that Ada and her group needed to climb down two levels.

Ada used both hands to steady herself on the railing as she climbed down the dead. Tomas and Tanisha both had to use only one hand on the railing. Their other hands were on the collars of their shirts, which they pulled up over their noses. The former of the two muttered Catholic prayers and apologies as he stepped on someone's father, mother, son, daughter, aunt, uncle, brother, and/or sister.

"One more floor," said Ada as she looked at the blood-splattered sign that read, "Commercial Level Sec- 12."

Tomas and Tanisha just nodded. Ada had no idea what awaited them on the other side of the stairwell, but it couldn't be worse than this.

Could it?

TWENTY-ONE

TOMAS RUIZ KNEW DEATH. He knew it all too well. Unlike both Tanisha and Ada, he had been in more than his fair share of battles before the UEF *Atlas*. In fact, he'd had a lot as a former member of the UEF Spartan Special Forces Group, or SSFG.

During the war with the AIC, the SSFG was an elite wing of the UEF Special Forces. Their specialty was being the first ground troops to land boots on any battlefield before the regular army or Marines. They were the spearhead to any attack.

Tomas had been in the SSFG for four years. In that time, he'd killed countless men and seen just as many die around him. He'd been in Europa, Vassar-4, Oran, and Talvos, among other major battles. His training and experience allowed him to survive the harshest conditions, behind enemy lines and against insurmountable odds.

Eventually, though, he'd had enough. Wanting to retire but being halfway through his fifth year of duty, Tomas was allowed to leave the SSFG, but finish out an even five years aboard the UEF *Atlas*. It was meant to be a cushy assignment before ending a distinguished career. No one aboard the *Atlas* had known about his past but Saito. He'd told none of the other survivors on Sanc-33.

Though Tomas had seen more than his fair share of death, he'd never seen it so concentrated in such tight confines. Seeing a corpse on a battlefield, a dead soldier, was much different, and in many ways easier than seeing dead civilians stacked two or three high beneath his feet.

“Okay, we’re here. I’ll check and make sure everything’s okay.” Ada stood next to a door that had “Engineering” on a sign above it. “You wait

here.”

Tomas wanted to stop her, but Ada was running the show. Maybe if they knew more about who he was, things would be different. But this was no time for a power struggle. “Bring back good news,” he said.

Ada actually snorted. “Yeah, I’ll see what I can do.”

ADA WASN’T GOING to make the same mistake twice. This time, she was going to do some additional scouting before telling her small group that the coast was clear, because last time it was most certainly hadn’t been. She slipped through the cracked-open door.

Blinking red lights were all that lit the engineering level. It made it a little hard for Ada to see as she slowly traversed the halls, looking for the engineering armory where they kept welding torches, flamethrowers, and cold casters.

With each step, Ada’s heart beat a little faster. She didn’t hear anything but the sound of her own heavy breathing. Her nerves tempered some when she saw a sign on the wall with an arrow pointing to the armory.

“It’s in your father’s office. But be quiet. Be quiet as a little mouse, Ada.”

Ada’s mother’s words replayed in her head, and she followed her advice. She crept down the engineering-level halls, as quiet as a mouse.

When she turned the corner in the direction of the arrow pointing to the armory, Ada heard music. While that could’ve been a sign that there might’ve been another survivor down here with her, logic came in and squashed that hope. If there was a survivor, they’d lived that long by knowing that making noise just attracted the Shapeless. And the music...it was classical, orchestral music that just felt unsettling.

Ada came upon the source of the music, which was between her and the engineering armory. On the holographic sign next to the open sliding door was the name “Jennine Holcomb-Electrical Engineering”. As she peeked around the side of the door frame, Ada didn’t expect to see an electrical engineer.

Standing in front of a mirror in Jennine Holcomb’s office was what looked to be, from behind, a human woman. That was, until Ada kept

watching her and noticed strange twitches and jerky movements. In the mirror's reflection, she saw a face that was slightly off.

The Shapeless alien that was pretending to be Jennine Holcomb had facial features that were all right, except for her mouth. She kept opening it far too wide, then closing it, seemingly in rhythm with the orchestral music playing in the office. Ada had no idea what the monster was doing, and didn't want to stick around to find out. Waiting for a moment when she wouldn't also be seen in the mirror's reflection, Ada sneaked past the open doorway.

Finally Ada reached the engineering armory. There was a hand scanner that restricted access. It was the worst possible scenario. Royce, the engineer who'd let them use his apartment and told them about the armory, had never mentioned security measures. How was she going to get in there?

There was only one option. Ada hated it, but she needed to get into the armory, one way or another. How she was going to do it was a bit trickier.

Ada needed the hand of an authorized staff member who could access the engineering armory. She took inventory of what she had on her to achieve that goal. After careful consideration, she decided she'd use the welding torch and her standard-issue Marine knife.

In order to take on the Shapeless alien pretending to be Jennine Holcomb, Ada knew she was probably going to take some damage. She accepted that reality and tried to bury it with what she could achieve by taking that pain. Standing again at the doorway to the electrical engineer's office, she took three deep breaths.

As quickly as she could, Ada turned the corner into Jennine Holcomb's office. Immediately she touched the flame to the alien, setting it ablaze. Without thought, because thinking would stop her from doing anything so reckless, she grabbed the Shapeless' arm by the wrist.

The fires that Ada lit burned her hand as she clung onto the Shapeless alien's wrist. She took out her knife and started cutting. In a last-ditch effort to strike back, or maybe just a dying goodbye screw-you, butter-knife-length spikes shot out from the alien's wrist, shooting through Ada's hand. Although she screamed out in pain, Ada kept cutting until the creature's hand hit the floor.

Ada let go of the Shapeless alien's wrist, picked up the cut-off hand, left Jennine Holcomb's room and pounded on the button to close the door behind her. She tried to ignore the banging on said door from the other side.

She tried to ignore the searing pain of her burns. And she tried to ignore the blood loss from her hand, which was only getting worse.

A little woozy from blood loss and trauma, Ada made her way back to the engineering armory and pressed the cut-off alien hand against the scanner. A series of green lights indicated that it worked. The doors opened up.

Ada had to take care of her wounds before she went any further. She could feel the nausea rising up inside her, which would be followed by dizziness. She knew what she had to do, but wasn't sure she could do it herself.

“WHAT’S TAKING HER SO LONG?” asked Tanisha, trying her best not to throw up again. In her brief time in the stairwell, she’d learned that not looking at all the bodies helped, so she stared intently at the wall.

“Relax. She’s scouting ahead, making sure everything’s safe for us. Let her take as long as she needs.” Tomas knew all about scouting ahead from his time in the SSFG and how important it really was, especially on foreign terrain.

“But what if she needs our help?”

“She’s fine. You’ve seen her. That woman is more than capable of taking care of herself,” Tomas reassured her.

“I know....but still, what if?”

Tomas and Tanisha waited for about twenty minutes, until the door to engineering floor flew open. Ada, holding her own wrist tight this time to try and slow her bleeding, fell into the door, which had been opened by her body weight against it.

“Shit! See! I knew everything wasn’t okay!” Tanisha panicked a little when she saw Ada and the damage she’d sustained.

“I found the engineering armory,” Ada said in a trembling voice. Then she passed out.

TWENTY-TWO

“TRY NOT TO TALK,” suggested Tomas.

Ada looked up at him in confusion.

“You’ve lost a lot of blood and you passed out,” Tomas said. “I had to hit you with a quick infusion, but that’s not going to be enough if we don’t move fast.”

He immediately knew what he was going to do to remedy the situation. And it wasn’t going to be pleasant.

Tomas took out his knife and cut the shoulder strap off Ada’s welding torch. He cut the other opposite end so he had just the strap, which he tied tight around the middle of her forearm. Once that blood flow was almost completely stopped, it was time for the truly painful part.

“I found it,” repeated Ada.

“Tanisha? Tanisha!” Tomas got Tanisha’s attention. “She’s going to need something to bite down on. You got anything? Anything at all?”

“Uh...” Tanisha thought really quickly about what she had on her. “Yeah, hold on.” She took off her watch. Definitely obsolete in this day and age, she wore it because her father, grandfather, and great-grandfather had all worn the same exact timepiece. Why she’d chosen it was for the leather strap, which she folded and put in Ada’s mouth.

“Private...Ada,” Tomas made sure to make eye contact with Ada. He wanted to make sure she knew what was coming. Tanisha grabbed her arm and tried to keep it steady. “I need to stop the bleeding.” He turned on the welding torch. “This is really gonna hurt.”

Ada, even in her weakened state, knew exactly what was about to happen. She nodded her head and gritted her teeth.

“Okay, on the count of three. One—” Tomas quickly touched the flame of the welding torch to the back side of Ada’s injured hand for about three seconds.

Ada almost blacked out, the pain was so intense. Even with the incredibly thick smell of death in the stairwell, she could smell the skin on her hand burning. When Tanisha flipped her hand over and Tomas took the welding torch flame to her palm, she heard the sound of her skin crackling.

“We’re all done. You did great.” Tomas helped Ada up to her feet. She was covered in sweat, her body still shaking from the shock she’d just suffered.

Ada looked at her hand before Tomas wrapped it up in gauze. It was barbecued. She didn’t know if she’d be able to use it again for a while without a stim shot. A mixture of painkiller and artificial adrenaline stimulant, stim shots were used on soldiers on the battlefield.

“You ready?” asked Tomas as Ada tried to regain her composure.

“No, but let’s do this anyway,” answered Ada with a fake smile. She was still so exhausted, and Tomas could see it.

After reaching into a pocket on his pants leg, Tomas took out the same pack of three stim shots every UEF soldier gets issued, no matter what their branch. “Take it.”

Ada shook her head. She insisted that she’d be fine. The soldier inside her wanted to power through it, but reality often interfered with honor and pride.

“You’re taking one. You don’t have a choice in the matter.” Tomas took out one of the easy-deploy syringe pens and stabbed Ada in the thigh.

First came the relief of heavy-duty military-grade pain killers. Ada felt about thirty seconds of pure euphoria. Then came the artificial adrenaline that took away any of the haze from her high and from the blood loss. She was as alert as she’d ever been, and ready to rock.

“Just point me in the right direction. I’ll lead the way.” Tomas lifted up his rifle and did just that.

Ada told Tomas where the engineering armory was. They passed the room where the Swedish Marine had burned the Shapeless alien. It looked like it had tried to pry its way out.

“Jesus, what happened here?” Tanisha looked at the slightly-ajar sliding door. One of the burned Shapeless alien’s hands had broken the seal, but it

must've died shortly after, because it was lifeless. Smoke bellowed out of the crack.

Before she went back to get the others, Ada, even in her injured state, had wedged her knife in the door frame of the armory room, preventing the sliding door from closing behind her. She'd gone through hell to get that thing open. She'd be damned if all that work was for nothing.

There was a mechanical servo-type sound and loud clicks as the sliding door to the armory room tried to close. Ada, Tomas, and Tanisha all entered what they found to be an alien-killing weapons playground. Lining one wall were modified maintenance flamethrowers used for thawing the ice that notoriously plagued the vast hull plating outside the docking bays. Along the other wall were maintenance welding torches, and cold-cast guns meant to put out electrical fires, which were a serious threat with all the technology aboard.

“Take what you need, but only what you can carry. Leave everything else behind, starting with the rifles. We don't need them.” Tomas dropped his rifle and picked up a flamethrower. Tanisha picked up a cold-cast gun. Ada kept her pistol, but traded her welding torch for a newer-looking one with what she suspected was a better range.

Armed and ready for a fight, the three of them left the engineering armory and level. They reluctantly re-entered the stairwell and made their way back up to the commercial level.

It was time for a reckoning.

TWENTY-THREE

WALTER AND FRANCESCA tried to distract themselves from thoughts of their fellow survivors who were risking their lives. So they played holographic poker and other card games, keeping their conversation with each other about the joys of life before the Shapeless on Sanc-33.

Rollins didn't want a distraction. Instead he kept his eyes and ears on his HUD, the apartment's front door, and the hole in the ceiling. Positioned between the two, he had his rifle on his lap, his only hand around the grip, finger on the trigger.

Where were they? Were they safe? Did they succeed, or were they stuck somewhere? All those thoughts ran through Rollins' mind with each tick of the clock. Ada and her group had been gone for over an hour at this point.

Rollins didn't hear the explosion, but they all felt the shock wave as Sanc-33 shook. He looked out the windows and saw a huge AIC dreadnought being torn apart by that uncanny gigantic liquid metal orb.

Everyone in the apartment's attention quickly shifted from the anarchy out in space to the sound of a knock at their door. Rollins signaled for Francesca and Walter to leave and go into the bedroom. With the rifle's business end resting on his stump, he approached the door, stopping about ten feet away.

"Thunder...." Rollins used an ancient code that dated back long before man ventured out into space. Also a history buff, Ada had agreed to use this code to identify herself if she had to come back through the front door.

There was no answer.

"Thunder..." Rollins disengaged the rifle's safety.

“Jake?” Rollins’ heart sank as he heard Saito’s voice on the other side of the door. “Jake, that you? Why don’t you open up?”

“Sir?” Rollins desperately wanted to believe it was his captain and friend on the other side of that door, but he knew better.

“C’mon. Don’t make me order you to do it. I *am* your commanding officer.”

“Afraid I can’t do that. Sorry, sir.”

“That’s probably the best move. I understand why you can’t trust it’s me. But it is me. I don’t know how to prove that to you. How would you like me to prove it?” It really sounded like Saito. He was more... *understanding* than usual, but that was undoubtedly his voice.

“Captain Saito, the real captain, he’d back off and leave us be. He’d accept that he can’t be trusted and retreat for his own men’s safety or, at the very least, peace of mind.” Rollins didn’t mean what he said, but couldn’t come up with anything else.

Around the corner of the bedroom doorway, Francesca peeked out. Rollins silently motioned for her to go back inside.

“That he probably would,” Saito said. “I should know, I’m him. I wasn’t always, but I’m your captain now.”

There was a loud bang at the door. It was hit so hard that a fist-shaped dent protruded into the apartment side.

“You’re just going to have to accept that.”

Another blow.

“You see, once we take you to the cold comfort of the Abyss...”

The third blow knocked open the door. It peeled like a can of tuna.

Rollins shot through the opening in the apartment door. His bullets had no effect. He didn’t even know if he hit anything. Scared by the sounds of gunfire, Francesca abandoned the bedroom and went into the bathroom. Walter followed. They shut the door.

Able to do little more than look on in equal parts horror and disgust, Rollins watched Saito’s face first appear in the opening in the apartment door. Then it disappeared for a second before a pair of legs clad in a UEF captain’s uniform pants and boots slid through. They landed on the carpeted floor at the end of an unnaturally-elongated torso. As if made of putty or elastic, the rest of Saito’s body followed the legs through. Taking about ten seconds, the torso returned to normal, and standing in front of Commander Rollins was the smiling spitting image of Lee Saito.

“Sorry you had to see that. I know your kind can be...disturbed by our appearance and abilities. But there’s no need to be. Really. We’re here to help you,” Saito held out his hand for Rollins to take.

Rollins backed up as he emptied his mag into Saito. He watched as none of the bullets stopped it from moving forward, and watched as those same bullets fell to the floor. Knowing what was coming next, he lowered his gun.

“We’re going to show you peace. We’re going to show you unity. We’re going to show you what humanity can be. So here, old friend. Take my hand.” Saito held out his hand. “Let me bring you that peace that every living thing desires.”

Rollins knew that he wasn’t looking at his captain, his friend. He knew he wasn’t looking at the man who’d saved his life on Talvos. He knew he wasn’t looking at the man who’d personally groomed him to take command. He knew that if he embraced this creature it would mean death. But he hoped that in doing so, it wouldn’t find Francesca or Walter. Two lives for one felt like a fair trade.

WALTER HAD ARMED himself with a kitchen knife. He stood next to the toilet as he heard gunfire from the apartment outside the closed bathroom door. As ravaged as his mind was by the natural rigors of old age and trauma, he still managed to think to turn on the sauna, where Francesca hid.

“What are you doing?” whispered Francesca as the sauna filled with steam. Walter turned it all the way up.

“Whatever you hear, girl, stay in there.”

The knife in Walter’s hand trembled as the bathroom door opened up. He forgot to lock it. Standing there was a man that Walter had never met, but whom he knew by reputation as Captain Saito. Saito was wiping blood off his hands with a rag, which seemed weird, since it was splattered and sprayed on his shirt and pants anyway.

“Stay back. I’m warning you,” Walter tried false bravado, puffed his chest out as much as his age allowed.

“Why fight me when you’re already so close to the Abyss?” Saito cocked his head to the side. “Why fight the inevitable?” He swiped his hand

across Walter's front. Mid-swipe, the hand turned into a blade and eviscerated him. "It's so much more painful when you fight it."

Francesca screamed as she saw Walter's blood spray onto the thick Plexiglas door of the sauna. Then she watched as his silhouette, which was all she could make out through the steam, slumped to the bathroom floor. A hand touched the door before quickly retracting.

"Smart. You're keeping it hot in there. But I wonder, child, how long can you take the heat?" asked Saito as he looked at his burnt hand.

"Longer than you!"

"Indeed, much longer than myself. But what's to stop me from simply waiting outside this bathroom for you to come out?"

Francesca didn't have an answer. Saito had a good point. She couldn't stay in here forever. Hell she couldn't stay in here for more than ten minutes, maybe.

Saito laughed. "Don't worry, child. I'm not going to wait out here for you to come out. Not because I don't care and don't want to escort you to the Abyss. There's too much to do. Starting with your friends, who are running around this space station, probably arming themselves and thinking that they're going to have their last stand against us in the cafeteria." He moved in close to the sauna door. "I'll let you in on a little secret, just between the two of us. They're walking into a trap. I know, devious, right? Anyway...I'll see you later. I promise."

Francesca slid down the wall of the sauna and got into the fetal position. She cried harder than she'd ever cried before, even more than when her family died. It wasn't from grief. Her tears were from pure abject fear.

TWENTY-FOUR

“YOU SURE YOU CAN MAKE THIS?” Ben asked Morgan as she continued to fight the *Lost* for control.

“You ask me that again and I’m going to put this thing into the side of this damn station out of spite,” Morgan barked back.

“Easy,” Ben responded.

“Not for me,” Morgan replied as she struggled to hold onto the pilot’s stick. It was like trying to corral a bronco with her bare hands.

She wasn’t trying to be a dick to Ben, but she had better things to do than make small talk at the moment. Even Ace was smart enough to keep his mouth shut, although she figured that was just because he had nothing smartass to say of his own.

Her prosthetic eyes calculated her trajectory and provided a red guidance track for her to follow into the docking bay.

“She’s landed this piece of junk under worse circumstances,” Ace said. “One of these days, she’ll be as good a pilot as I am.”

Morgan resisted the urge to take her hand off the controls to give him the finger. The *Lost* barreled down on the plasma shield-covered docking bay. Her speed wasn’t dangerous with solid controls. With these controls, well, she had to admit to herself that it was a little dicey.

Once they broke inside the shield cover, they’d be inside the station’s artificial gravity. At that point, she’d lose control. Since she didn’t have thruster control, the best hope was to bring the *Lost* to a slide stop in the docking bay.

The only thing she had to hope for was—

“Shit,” she said.

“What?” Ben asked anxiously.

“Hang on,” she said. “This is gonna be bumpy.”

The docking bay loomed up in front of them. She felt the jolt as the ship passed the invisible plasma shield and moved into the bay proper.

The floor of the docking bay was absolutely packed with ships. It looked like every ship in the station was still in port, like nobody had ever left.

The initial impact of the *Lost*'s bottom hitting the docking-bay floor slammed her head forward in her jumpseat. She jerked forward so hard she figured she might have whiplash. Sparks flew as the ship slid across the floor.

The *Lost* started sliding uncontrollably. First, it hit a simple station rover repair ship, causing it to start spinning. Next it hit a metal working stand that almost brought it to a stop. It ended by hitting the far wall of the docking bay, after pinballing off two other docked ships.

Every alarm and warning sound/light blared inside the *Lost*'s cockpit. All three people inside were knocked out by the crash landing.

TWENTY-FIVE

BEN UNCLIPPED his safety belt and fell out of his captain's chair. His ribs were killing him. He might've broken a few from the whiplash.

On his hands and knees, Ben spat up some blood. He took a moment to catch his breath and acclimate himself to his recently-endured injuries. As he rose to his feet, Ace started stirring.

"You okay?" asked Ben as he stood up, groaning from the pain radiating from his ribs.

"What kind of stupid question is that?" Ace unbuckled himself from his seat. His mouth too was filled with blood, which he spat out in Ben's direction, though it didn't hit him.

"Morgan?" Ben hurried over as fast as he could to check on her. Her artificial eyes were open, but they made it hard to tell if she was conscious.

"Yeah, yeah," said Morgan, rubbing the back of her neck.

"That was either good flying or good crashing," Ben said.

"Same difference," Morgan said.

Ben coughed up a little more blood.

"You don't look so good," Ace said.

"That makes two of us," Ben wheezed. His ribs were still on fire, but after a little stretching he decided it was just badly bruised.

"No, seriously, he's right," Morgan said. She got up out of her chair. "Let me take a look."

"I'm guessing I don't have a choice, do I?" Ben protested as Morgan lifted up his shirt. There was already deep, dark bruising on his ribs where the crisscrossing seat belt had kept him in place. "Don't we have more important things to worry about than my boo-boos?"

“And you’re coughing up blood? This is bad. Hold on, gonna take a deeper look. HUD, change view mode, x-ray.” Ben watched as Morgan’s eye color flashed briefly. He assumed she was seeing beneath his skin and muscle. Ben winced as Morgan touched his bruised ribs.

“So how bad is it, doc?” he asked.

“Not good. This might be a problem. We need to get those wrapped up.”

“Wrapped up? I’m not a damn Christmas present.”

“Shut up and sit down,” Morgan said as she forced Ben into her pilot’s seat.

“Fine,” Ben said. “While we’re doing this, Ace, go on out and check out this place. See what we’ve gotten ourselves into.”

“I can tell you that one already,” Ace said as he made his way toward the rear of the *Lost*. “Trouble.”

With one press of a worn-down button, the loading ramp unlatched and lowered. After a moment, Ace’s voice came over the *Lost*’s speakers. “Looks like we missed the party.” he said. “And it was a nasty party.”

Ben activated the voice transmitter in the cockpit. “What do you mean?” he asked.

“You’ll see,” Ace said. “I’m collecting weapons.”

Morgan and Ben exchanged glances.

“From where?” Morgan asked.

“Looks like something bad went down out here,” Ace said, “or several something bads. Lots of military armament, though. I’m loading up.”

Ben shook his head and clipped off the radio transmitter. “He sounds like a kid in a candy shop.”

“If he found weapons, he is,” Morgan said as she made one more loop around Ben’s ribs with one of the three rolls of gauze she was using. She clipped it on, then stepped back.

“No way!” Ace exclaimed.

Ben rolled his eyes and flipped the transmitter back on. “What now?”

“I just checked the hallway outside the bay,” Ace said. “You’re not gonna believe what I found.”

“Don’t go too far,” Ben said.

“Yes, mother,” Ace said.

“You’re good to go,” Morgan said to Ben.

Ben nodded. “We’ll be out in a minute,” he said, then switched off the transmitter again.

“Take your time,” Ace said, sounding like he was having fun now.

“Does he always have mood swings like this?” Ben murmured to Morgan as he put his shirt back on.

She shrugged. “He burns hot and cold. The guy drives me nuts sometimes, but you have to give him credit. As crazy angry as he can get, he cools off fast. And he’s loyal. That’s worth a lot of grief.”

It dawned on Ben that Morgan actually liked Ace, in spite of the fact that they seemed to enjoy being at each other’s throats. Maybe Ben should have known that already. After all, they’d been working together long before they’d recruited him, and his own recruitment had really been for his money and connections at the time. As Ben recalled, Morgan had been fine continuing along with just her and Ace.

“I guess that’s true.”

“Don’t get me wrong,” Morgan said as she stood up and they headed for the back ramp. “He’s an asshole.”

Ben laughed. “But he’s your asshole.”

“Something like that,” Morgan said. “And speaking of assholes.” She rounded on Ben just as they reached the ramp. “If we die or lose this ship in all this, just to go chasing after your daddy, I’ll make Ace look like the sweetest guy you ever met.”

Ben felt his pulse quicken. It was the ferociousness of her words that took him off guard. “I didn’t—”

“We came out here chasing the *Atlas*,” she said, making it clear she was talking about her and Ace. “You want to find daddy.”

“I’m still chasing the *Atlas*,” he said defensively. “That’s why—”

“Bullshit,” she said. “You’re here to find the old man, and that’s fine. But if it comes down to finding out what happened to your old man or figuring out just what this damn alien invasion is, I bet you can guess which way this is going.”

Her artificial eyes shifted as she stared.

Ben thought about what those eyes meant to her. She’d lost her sight to the Oblivion, along with her husband and son. He realized how his own search for his father was a painful reminder to Morgan that she could never save those taken from her.

“Okay,” Ben said. “I get it. Whatever we find out about my father, the most important thing is to understand what the Oblivion’s doing.”

“It’s to stop them,” Morgan said. “Simple as that.”

If it's an alien invasion, Ben thought, *how exactly are we going to stop that?* But he didn't say anything. Morgan didn't seem to be in the mood to argue semantics.

"Sounds great," Ben said.

Morgan nodded. "Now let's go see what kinda clusterfuck Ace is getting into." She gestured ahead. "After you."

Ben nearly reached the end the loading ramp when he pulled up short. "What the hell?"

Two station police robots were pointing guns straight at him.

TWENTY-SIX

“IDENTIFY YOURSELF,” ordered one of the robots in what Ben couldn’t help but think was the least appropriately robotic voice. It sounded more like a bored bureaucrat.

“Uhhhh...” Ben didn’t know how to answer. Then he heard Ace laughing as he walked up behind the bot.

“Stand down,” Ace said, still giggling to himself and shaking his head. “Sorry, guys, I just couldn’t help myself. Look at these things, aren’t they cool? Found them in the hallway back there.”

“This...this is...” Ben stared beyond Ace at the dead bodies littering the docking bay. He saw lots of military, but there were plenty of civilians, too. Women and children. It looked like a bomb had gone off at the far end of the hangar, but that didn’t even seem to account for most of the damage. The smell hit him next, and he felt sick to his stomach. “My God,” he whispered.

“Is pretty damn cool, right?” Ace put one arm around one of the robots. “They’re pretty much blank slates, from what I can tell. We can program these bad boys to do whatever we want.”

“What the hell happened here?” Ben managed to ask at last, bracing himself with one hand on the loading ramp hydraulics, staring at the ghoulish surroundings.

“Oh, you meant all these poor dead bastards?” Ace said, glancing behind him. “Yeah, it’s pretty rough. I told you, something bad went down here.” He paused. “Here, want a gun?” Ace bent over a handful of weapons he’d scavenged and picked up one of the rifles.

Ben took the rifle without a word, struggling to come to terms with the carnage. That Ace seemed to acclimate to it instantly was all the more disturbing to Ben. Ace had been a Marine in another life. He'd seen some war zones, but how could he be so blasé about this? It must be a coping mechanism.

"I'll take one, too," said Morgan, stepping out of the ship. "Shit," she said, stopping in her tracks as she looked at the carnage. "What a shitshow." She wrinkled her nose. "God, the smell." Ace threw her a gun, which she caught awkwardly. "Easy, idiot."

"So what the hell do we do now?" Ace asked.

Ben took another moment to consider the vileness of what had happened in the docking bay. "We need to find some answers," Ben said. "Like what the hell happened here."

"And what the hell happened out there," Morgan said, pointing back out of the dock. "We just saw a dreadnought get swallowed up in space."

"Whatever we find out," Ben said, "I've got a feeling we'll want to be able to get outta here fast. How's the ship?"

Morgan scratched her chin and started to look around the side of the *Lost*, running her hand along the hull plating. "I don't think it's as bad as it looks."

"Good," Ace said. "Because it looks like a tin can full of holes."

"Lemme see what I can do," Morgan said.

Ben nodded. "Ace and I will go exploring, see if we can find any survivors that can explain ... all this. Any problems, just raise me on my HUD."

Ace reached down to his pile of weapons and grabbed a handgun that he put in his shoulder holster. "Just in case we run into whatever did all this."

It was a fair point. Ben grabbed another gun too.

"For the record, if there's any problems I'm getting the hell out of here," Morgan said.

"Yeah, once you get that bucket flying again," Ace snorted.

"In the meantime, reprogram your police robot friends to watch my six," Morgan said.

Ben looked at Ace. "Can you do that?"

Ace nodded. "No problemo."

After several minutes that proved it was a little more than 'no problemo,' Ace finally got one of the bots reprogrammed. He and Ben took

the other one as they headed through the docking bay exit.

“This is pretty gruesome,” said Ben as he and Ace entered the main corridor. They very quickly discovered that the dead station residents weren’t just confined to the docking bay. They were everywhere.

“Smells terrible,” said Ace. “And I can’t smell anything, but still... smells horrible.”

“I know. Let’s just keep moving.”

Seriously. What happened here? It’s like a real-life horror movie. I’ve seen dead people before, but this ...

Ben stepped over and around the dead. There were men, women, and children. Whatever had done this to them hadn’t discriminated. They were equal-opportunity mass murderers.

“I don’t know what we’re hoping to find in here. Looks like a graveyard minus the graves.”

Ben focused on the task at hand. His HUD accessed the station map. According to it, there was a stairwell that led from engineering to the residential, then the commercial levels. He’d check those first and figure out where to go from there.

Ace and Ben passed a room labeled as the engineering armory. They reached a room which, according to the map, was the electrical engineer’s office. That one caught Ben’s attention.

“Hey, take a look at this.” He saw a hand sticking out of office’s wedged-open door. It was gnarled, twisted, vaguely human but, at the same time, clearly not.

“What about it? Looks like some poor bastard got barbecued.” Ace looked at the hand and the smoke coming out of the cracked-open door, and apparently thought nothing of it.

Ben wasn’t so sure. He poked at the hand-like thing with his rifle. It fell off, landed on the floor and disintegrated into nothingness.

“Okay, that’s weird,” Ace said. “That’s a lot weird. You think that was ...” He left his sentence hanging.

Ben shrugged. “I don’t know what the hell we’re dealing with here.”

“I was really hoping to go my whole life without running into any actual damn aliens.”

“I was hoping to spend my whole life on a beach on Taras-3, sipping daiquiris,” Ben said. “But we don’t all get what we want. C’mon, I think I see the stairs. We got to go up a floor.”

Both Ben and Ace threw up immediately upon opening the doors to the stairs. The smell of all that death overwhelmed them. Ben couldn't even keep the door open, he retched so hard. Neither of them had been expecting that.

"How many dudes are in there?" asked Ace, wiping his mouth, eyes watering.

"I don't—" Ben threw up again.

"Do we have to take the stairs?" Ace asked. "Anything has to be better than a stairwell filled with dead bodies stacked three high."

"I want to get to the residential floor," Ben said. "That's our best chance to find someone still alive."

Ace glanced over. "I'm guessing the elevators don't work."

Ben shook his head. "And the only other stairwell is on the other side of the station. We don't have a choice."

"Shit," Ace said. "Fine," he said, psyching himself up. "Let's do it."

They opened the door to the stairwell again and started climbing.

As soon as they made the first turn on the staircase, they heard talking coming from a couple flights above them.

Ace looked like he was about to yell when Ben slapped him in the chest and put his finger to his mouth.

Ace frowned and shrugged, like he was asking Ben what the big deal was. And Ben honestly couldn't say, but he wanted to hear what they were saying first.

The voices grew louder. They were coming down the stairs. Ace and Ben took up positions on either side of the stairwell.

Two bald men in robes turned the corner. They were walking nonchalantly over the corpses, reciting some nonsense about embracing the abyss and sprinkling some liquid on the bodies.

One of the two looked up in surprise at Ace.

"Why, hello!" he said cheerfully, as if finding someone standing in the midst of the ghoulish scene was something he'd expected to happen. "Have you heard the good word of the Abyss? Let us help you in your trans—"

Ace cut off him off with a superheated high-speed round straight through the center of his forehead.

The other robed man looked terrified and froze. He turned to run, but Ben wasn't having any of that.

“Oh no you don’t, pal.” Ben stumbled as he tried to climb up over the bodies after him. It would’ve been a comical sight if the setting wasn’t so horrendous. Finally he grabbed hold of the cultist’s arm with his own metallic, robotic one. It had no problem maintaining an unbreakable grip.

“I...I didn’t do anything,” the man said.

Ben looked around, feet still slipping on dead people. “Well, somebody did. You’re coming with us...what’s your name?”

“There’s no need for names once you’re one with the Abyss,” answered the cultist in a shaky, scared voice.

“Well, I’m gonna call you Bob. What say we get out of this stairwell, Bob?”

TWENTY-SEVEN

BEN, Ace, and Bob climbed out of the stairwell on the residential level. Ben and Ace happily took a minute to take in that relatively fresh recycled air. Bob just looked terrified.

“What happened here, Bob?” asked Ben as the trio slowly walked through the halls of the residential level. The halls were lit up red by emergency lighting, making any blood look like water.

“I don’t know.”

Ace punched Bob in the back of the head. “Try again, Bob.”

“I...our saviors, all of our saviors have arrived. They’ve come to usher in a new peaceful, united world.”

“This look peaceful to you, Bob?” asked Ace. Though it wasn’t as bad as the docking bay and certainly not as bad as the stairwell, they still passed the occasional dead station occupant on the residential level.

“The spilling of blood is necessary for the transition.”

“Let’s go one at a time here, Bobby. First, who are the saviors?” Ben stopped and peeked inside the open door of one of the apartments. There didn’t appear to be anything there, so he moved on.

“They come from the stars, from deep space. In our texts we call them the Shapeless. But that’s just a temporary name, before they become what they are meant to be.” Bob trembled as he walked and talked, with Ace hot on his heels. Ben could tell Ace was salivating at the thought of killing the cultist, and didn’t blame him. If he were honest, he wanted to as well. But they needed information more than revenge right now.

“The Shapeless, huh? Why do you call them that?” asked Ben.

“Because they’re shapeshifters. They have no set form, their bodies—goodness, they’re wonderful, they can become whatever or whoever they want, down to their very DNA. It’s fascinating, really.”

“Yeah, really fascinating,” said Ace icily.

“What are they meant to be, Bob?” Ben was listening, but he also kept his eyes forward and alert, looking for any threats.

“Us. They’re meant to become us and create a new humanity, one free of war, racism, greed, poverty, and hunger. They will make humankind wonderful once more.”

“How exactly would they do that?”

“It’s hard to explain.”

“Try,” insisted Ace as he poked his rifle into Bob’s back.

“Yes, they’ll kill our physical bodies, but those aren’t important. Our souls will go to the Abyss, the same Abyss that they come from. The Shapeless will sacrifice their own nirvana by taking the forms of our physical selves as we get purified by the cold deep dark of space. Once we’re ready, we too will be granted their same bodies in return; we will become the Shapeless ourselves.” Bob’s voice changed as he described this part. It properly conveyed how batshit crazy the Oblivion cultist’s beliefs were.

“So let me get this straight,” Ace said. “They kill us, human beings. Take our forms. Our ‘souls’ get evicted out into space, and eventually we become the Shapeless, only to what? Do the same to some other species?”

“Exactly!” Bob enthusiastically confirmed.

“All I see is pure slaughter,” Ben said solemnly. “Nothing more, nothing less. Killing for the sake of killing. I’m willing to bet these ‘saviors’ of yours are simply in the business of genocide.”

“Ding, ding, ding,” Ace said.

“You don’t understand,” Bob said. “They don’t just kill. They become you. Though your soul exists, your body, your memories don’t. And what are memories other than a blueprint for what a person is?” He was going into full babbling psycho mode.

“That’s all really interesting, Bob, but why don’t you tell us where we can find any survivors?” Ben asked. “Or maybe an escape shuttle.”

“Or anything other than some complete cultist babbling nonsense,” Ace said. “Otherwise, what’s to stop us from putting a bullet in you?”

“Survivors?” Bob asked, genuinely curious. “You mean those who haven’t transitioned yet?”

“Yeah, Bob,” Ben said. “That’s called a survivor.”

“Very few,” Bob said, “and I couldn’t say where. Those remaining are being collected.”

Ben didn’t like all the euphemisms. “Captured” was *collected*. “Killed” was *transitioned*. It made him sick to his stomach. “And an escape shuttle?” he asked.

“We’re going with our saviors when they leave. They promised they’d take us with them.”

Ben stopped. He turned, gun pointed at Bob’s head. “Take you with them where?”

“Vassar-1, of course,” Bob said. “That’s where it’s going to begin.”

Ben looked at Ace. He shrugged back. It was news to him, too. “Why Vassar-1?” Ben asked.

“We don’t question the saviors. They’ve chosen to replace the populace there. We have other Oblivion members there, waiting for our signal and for us to arrive.”

Ace hit Bob in the back with butt of his rifle. He crumpled to the ground.

“What the hell, Ace?” Ben asked, reaching down to grab the cultist, who looked dazed but not knocked out. “We’re finally getting some answers.”

“I can’t stand listening to this piece of garbage! He’s selling out his own species!”

With Ben’s help, Bob stood on unsteady legs. “Sell them out? No! We’re saving them!”

Ben was about to ask more about the Vassar-1 plan when a blast door popped open just ahead.

Out of nowhere, what looked to be a teenage girl ran out from one of the apartments about thirty yards away down the hall. Ben couldn’t believe his eyes at first. The sweaty girl looked around, panicked, and froze when she saw Ben.

“No, no, no! Stay away from me!” The girl had a gun in her hand and pointed it vaguely in their direction.

“Whoa there! Calm down. We aren’t here to hurt you!” Ben tried to reassure the teen. He put his rifle down, knowing Ace still had his

concealed behind the cultist.

“How d-d-do I know that? How do I k-k-know that you’re not one of those *things*?” The gun shook in her unsteady hands.

“You see this guy here?” asked Ace, shoving Bob forward.

“Yeah?”

“Know what he is?”

She focused on the robed man for a split second. “Yeah, he’s one of those Oblivion creeps.”

“Tell her, Bob,” Ace said. “Tell her what you told us about those Shapeless things.”

“Ummm, well, they’re here to save us. We called, and they came to free us from our—”

Ace shot him in the back of the head. Blood splattered back on Ben’s chest as the cultist stumbled forward and landed face-first on the ground in front of them.

“That proof enough that we ain’t some of those monsters?” asked Ace.

The teen looked confused. “No! That’s not...is that supposed to prove I can trust you?”

Ace seemed to mull that over. “I mean, yeah,” he said at last, as if the logic of the situation failed him.

“Listen,” Ben said, trying to ignore the blood splattered on the front of his shirt. “I’m here looking for Captain Lee Saito. He’s a UEF officer from the super-dreadnought *Atlas*. We have reason to believe the ship came here, to this station.” Ben paused as the girl’s mouth fell open. She looked like she was in shock. “Does any of that make sense to you?” he asked.

The teen lowered her gun. “Captain Saito?”

“Yes! Do you know him?”

She still seemed shocked. “No, I never met him,” she said. “I mean, not really. At least not the *real* him.”

Not the real him? Ben wondered.

“But the others did.”

Now it was Ben’s turn to be shocked. “There are others? Others who might know my father?”

She cocked her head. “Your father?”

“My name is Ben Saito.” He kept his empty hands up. “What’s your name?”

“Francesca,” answered the teen.

“Francesca, what did you mean by the others? Are there survivors from the *Atlas*?”

Francesca nodded.

“Are they with you? Are they still alive?”

“They’re not with me, no. They left.”

“They left? Where did they go, Francesca?”

She looked scared now. “To get weapons,” she whispered. “But they didn’t come back.”

TWENTY-EIGHT

“READY?” asked Tomas. He held his flamethrower and turned on the gas-fed flames. One pull of the trigger, and it would spew out fiery death.

“No,” answered Tanisha. She hugged the wall next to Tomas. Her grip kept loosening, then re-tightening, around her cold-cast gun.

“Yes,” answered Ada, still a little groggy from her injuries. The stim shot was wearing off. She brought up the rear.

Around the corner from that wall was the main cafeteria on the commercial level. That was where the monster posing as Saito wanted any survivors on board to gather and find “peace.” That was where Ada wanted to ambush and kill it, and however many other Shapeless were there. From the screeches they heard, there must’ve been a lot.

“On three,” said Tomas. “One, two, three!”

Tomas was the first around the corner. He was ready to start spraying flames, but was surprised to see what looked like people, not monsters. It took him by surprise so much that he didn’t know what to do.

Tanisha was next. Her gaze immediately focused on the Shapeless who’d posed as kids. There were quite a few, maybe six or seven. They made her think of her own kids, back home on Mars. She couldn’t imagine hitting them with extreme cold and shattering their little bodies. All logic was out the window.

“Are you here for salvation?” asked one of the female Shapeless.

Ada turned the corner and started shooting literal fire at the Shapeless. She didn’t have the same hesitation the others had. She knew exactly what she was looking at.

“They aren’t human!” she screamed as she mashed down the connection circuit on the flame torch she’d fashioned from one of the workbenches in engineering. The flames lit her face in an eerie red hue as she screamed, spittle running down her chin. “They aren’t human!”

Immediately the Shapeless started to screech and cry out in their death throes as the torch burned them. Tomas joined the vengeance by canvassing the whole open area with flames as well. Tanisha just watched, partially disgusted but also scared. She watched as the creatures changed shapes, writhed, and became things so far from human they were impossible to recognize.

Suddenly, a piercing siren cut through the sound of the screeching creatures in front of them.

Ada had no idea what it meant; at least, not at first. It wasn’t until it was too late and half-inch-thick steel shutters came down from all open sides of the cafeteria that she realized what was happening.

They were locked in with the writhing creatures in front of them.

“It’s a trap!” yelled out Tomas.

“Yeah, no shit,” Ada said, looking around. “Let’s find a way out of here before we burn to death.”

As if on cue, the cafeteria’s fire safety system turned on, blasting the whole area with flame-retardant foam that put out every fire.

“Well...at least we’re not going to burn to death,” Tanisha said.

“We might wish we had,” Ada said. “We got incoming.”

Something was oozing through the vents on the ceiling. A couple of the vents fell off. Shapeless began jumping down from them.

Jumping was a generous interpretation. It was more like they were falling, one on top of another, slapping against the ground with wet thuds, then rising and reforming as human-shaped things.

“They figured out how to use the vents,” Ada said.

“How?” Tomas said.

Ada’s voice was flat, but she felt even sicker than before. “They must’ve seen me,” she said. “On the last food run.”

Ada stepped forward and started lighting Shapeless on fire. So did Tomas. The problem was, the aliens just kept coming, one after the other.

“This is bad.” Tomas pointed out the obvious. “I don’t know how much juice these things have, and those monsters aren’t slowing down.”

“Try to concentrate them in one area, focus our flames on them,” Ada said. “Tanisha, I need you to tackle that vent behind us. Freeze whatever comes out and if you can, the vent opening itself.”

Tanisha turned and saw two Shapeless coming straight for her and the small group. They were trying to regain some form as they kept moving forward. She swallowed hard, took a couple of steps forward, and fired the cold caster.

The cold casters sprayed a liquid specifically designed to not only freeze fast, but to conduct that cold to whatever was touched. It was oxygen itself that activated it, and cooling coils in the barrel that flash-cooled it. In practice it was basically an oversized spray bottle that froze whatever was sprayed.

Tanisha wasn't close enough to the Shapeless, so she had to take a couple more steps forward. Her heart raced as the creatures tried to reach out and swing with claw- and blade-lined limbs, just barely missing her. But to her surprise and, she suspected, Ada's and Tomas' too, she didn't lose her nerve. She even kept spraying as one of the deadly Shapeless limbs stabbed her in the thigh.

“Damn you, asshole!” she shrieked. She focused her cold-caster spray on the Shapeless that injured her, freezing it in place. Then she took care of the second one. Finally she moved her attention to the vent, freezing the Shapeless trying to squeeze out and the opening itself at the same time.

“Do you see him?” asked Ada as she and Tomas had to back up from their handiwork and the resulting extreme heat.

“See who?” answered Tomas with a question. His flamethrower started to sputter; then the stream of flames stopped. “Dammit! I'm out!”

“Captain Saito. Or that thing that pretending to be him.”

Tomas shook his head as Ada's flame torch sputtered and died. “I think we have more important things to worry about right now,” he said.

Shapeless were still squeezing out of the vents. Many of them died in the fires below, but eventually they started piling up. The new arrivals landed on the ones before them and climbed down, towards the group of survivors.

“Back up,” said Ada as Tanisha did her best to take out as many Shapeless as she could with her cold caster, at least until it started to fall silent. They backed all the way up to one of the steel shutters.

Ada knew what was coming. It was inevitable. They were going to die.

Ada took out her pistol and knife. Tomas picked up a chair, and had his standard-issue pistol. Tanisha held the depleted cold cast gun as a club.

“It was an honor to fight alongside you two. Really. No one else I’d rather greet the great beyond with,” said Tomas.

Tanisha was trembling. Tears streamed down her face.

“Screw that,” Ada said. “It’s not over yet.” She had nothing else to back up her statement with, but she didn’t care. She wasn’t giving up.

The Shapeless got closer. Ada and Tomas warded them off as much as they could with their pistols. Once those were out of ammo, they swung their knives wildly like cornered animals. Tanisha swung wildly with her cold-cast gun until one of the Shapeless’ tendrils wrapped around it and wrenched it away.

She fell forward, but Ada reached out and dragged her back as one of the Shapeless stabbed forward and sucked the knife right out of her hand.

Without thinking, Ada balled up her fists and punched the tendril, slapping the Shapeless away. It was ludicrous, she thought. She was actually trying to fight these things off with her bare knuckles.

She took a step back and felt her ass bump up against the steel shutter that had trapped them in the cafeteria.

There was nowhere else to go. She felt something snap inside.

“Come on, you bastards,” she said, laughing crazily, fists held high. “Put up your dukes!”

Then she felt someone knock on her ass.

TWENTY-NINE

“I SWEAR, I CAN HEAR SOMETHING,” Ben said. He knocked on the steel wall again.

“Hello?” a woman screamed.

“Hello?” Ben replied.

“Help! We need help! We’re trapped!” the voice pleaded.

Ben and Ace exchanged a look. “It could be those alien things,” Ace said. “They can look human, right? So maybe they sound human, too.”

Francesca rushed forward. “Ada!” she screamed. She looked at Ben and Ace. “I know her voice. That’s Ada. She’s one of the survivors.” She looked pleadingly at Ben. “She was on the *Atlas*.”

That was enough for Ben. “Stand clear, we’re coming through!”

Ace looked surprised. “We are?”

Ben raised his rifle. “Get your damn robot up here!”

He fired a dozen superheated bullets through the steel shutter in a concentrated circle. The wall was some sort of temporary emergency curtain, probably to contain fire. It yielded to the bullets easily, tearing open. Ben could hear some kind of animal screeching coming from the other side, but he didn’t have time to investigate before Ace shoved him aside.

“We got this,” he said triumphantly as the police robot crashed its fingers into the hole blown in the shutter and ripped it wide open.

Ben looked over the shoulder of the police robot and through the hole. “What the hell?”

Creatures that looked like churning masses of bone, flesh, and meat, always shifting and trying to find a cohesive shape or form, were massing

just beyond the hole. Some of the things must have noticed their efforts, and came straight for the opening.

“What the holy hell...?” Ace said as he came up next to Ben.

“It’s them,” Francesca said. The euphoria of finding her friends seemed to be fading. She was backing away from the hole, shaking her head. “Oh God, it’s them.”

Ben turned to Ace. “Tell me that damn thing can do more than politely ask people to identify themselves.”

Ace reached up to his temple, and Ben knew he was interacting with his HUD. A moment later, the police drone finished shoving its way through the opening, which was now big enough for Ben and Ace to walk through. Its robotic fingers retracted, and a pair of huge autocannons slipped out.

“Watch this,” Ace said. The police drone started firing 20mm pulse rounds into the creatures beyond. “That should slow them down.”

The power of the bullets sent chunks and pieces of the creatures splattering everywhere. Still, the mass of the creatures seemed to barely notice as the police robot kept pushing forward, blasting chunk after chunk away.

“Uh, Ace,” Ben said. “That doesn’t seem—”

“Bullets can’t stop them!” barked a woman who leaned her head into the opening. She was wearing a UEF Marine flak jacket. One of her arms was covered in blood that ran up her neck. A thick vein bulged on her forehead, and she had a crazed look that made Ben involuntarily lean back.

“Who the hell are you?” Ace asked. Ben realized she had the voice that Francesca had called Ada.

“Who the hell cares!” she snapped back. “Your goddamn toy isn’t going to save us.”

“It’s not a toy, lady,” Ace said. “It’s a—”

“Tanisha, go,” Ada said to someone beside her. She shoved a scared-looking woman through the opening.

Without thinking, Ben reached out and grabbed her. She was lighter than he expected. She was tiny, in fact, and she was trembling so badly that he thought something might be wrong with her. “You’re okay, Tanisha,” he said.

She nodded, but looked almost relieved when he let go of her. She shuffled back to join Francesca, who was huddling against the other side of the hallway.

“Shit,” Ace said, “Bastards!”

Ben looked back and saw that the creatures were swarming over the police drone. Abruptly, both the 20mm guns went silent.

“Now what?”

Ada stuck her head back through the opening. “Keep them occupied,” she said. “I have an idea.”

She grabbed the man that had been standing with her. Like her, he wore a UEF flak jacket. These were all *Atlas* survivors, Ben realized. All of them.

“How the hell do we keep them occupied if bullets won’t kill them?” Ace shouted back.

Ada slammed her fist into the metal shutter so hard it dented inward and almost smacked Ace in the side of his face. “Just figure something out!” she growled; then she and the other one took off in the direction of one of the food stands.

“Super,” said Ace. “We try to rescue them and they run off.”

Ben stuck the business end of his rifle through the opening and started firing at the creatures.

“Hey, dummy,” Ace said. “She just said that bullets won’t kill them.”

“But they’ll distract them, dipshit,” Ben said. “So start shooting.”

“This is stupid,” Ace said. “Why didn’t she just come with us?”

“Because she doesn’t want to get away,” said the small voice of Tanisha behind them.

Ben and Ace glanced back at her.

“She wants to kill them,” Tanisha said. “She wants to kill all of them.”

Ben looked back at Ace as the two of them continued firing. “Hard to disagree with that.”

“Well, if the plan is to keep them coming at us, it’s working,” Ace said as the first of the creatures had almost reached the opening. “They’re here.”

THIRTY

ACE WAS RIGHT, of course. But Ben also saw that whatever Ada was doing, she was getting time to do it. He squinted as he saw her climbing over the top of the counter and running into the kitchen. She reappeared a few seconds later with a flexible coil-like metal pipe. She dragged it out just as the other Marine with her started pulling more pipe with him. The ends of the pipes were open, and even from this distance, Ben could see the tell-tale disturbances in the air around them that told him what they were.

“Shit,” Ben said. “Those are gas lines.”

Ace followed Ben’s line of sight. “What the hell are they doing with those?”

Ada pulled something from her utility belt. Ben knew instantly what it was. He’d seen plenty of Marines stationed on the UEF ships he’d served on.

Having been a Marine himself once upon a time, Ace spotted it right away as well. “You don’t think she’s gonna—”

Ada almost nonchalantly pulled the pin and armed the white phosphorus grenade.

“I think she’s gonna,” Ben said.

Ada let out a blood-curdling stream of profanity that would make most of the men Ben had ever served with blush as she tossed the grenade into the center of the cafeteria.

Then she dove behind the cafeteria counter.

Ace and Ben both spun around and ran for the other side of the hallway, screaming at Tanisha and Francesca to get down, even though they were already huddled together tightly.

Ben put his arms around them in a big bear hug just as a wave of fire burst through the hole in the steel shutter and scorched the ceiling of the hallway, ripping a hole in it that sent electrical wires and ceiling panels falling down all around them.

A couple of body parts that seemed more or less whole managed to blow through the hole, too. Ace ran around like a madman, blowing any chunks he found into the tiniest pieces he could. Soot and ash spilled out of the opening into the cafeteria, like a black cloud of death.

“Ada!” screamed Francesca, getting to her feet and running toward the opening. Ben scooped her up before she could get there.

“Hang on,” he said. “Wait a second. We don’t even know—”

“What the hell was she thinking?” Ace exploded. “That could have blown open a hole right into space!” He shook his head angrily. “We could be losing oxygen right now. We might be dead and just not know it yet.”

“Take it easy,” Ben said. “I think if we were getting sucked into space, it would have happened by now.”

“Is she still alive?” Francesca asked, as if Ben or anyone else could answer that question.

Ace snorted. “There’s no way—”

Something slammed hard against the metal shutter, and Ben and Ace both instinctively swung their rifles around.

“One upside to blowing a hole into space is that it would clear the air in here a little bit,” Ada said, coughing as she stuck her head through the hole. Her face was covered in black soot and streaked with what looked like a fresh smear of blood.

She climbed out, followed by the other Marine. He, too, was covered black from head to foot.

Ace just stared at her. “You’re crazy.”

“I’ve been called worse,” she said.

“Ada, I presume?” Ben said.

Ada cocked her head. “How did you—”

“Ada!” screamed Francesca, pulling away from Ben’s grip and rushing to hug her.

Ada winced as the teenager gave her a big hug, probably aggravating half a dozen injuries in the process. “Hey, kiddo,” Ada said. “Who are your new friends?”

Ben was about to introduce himself when he sensed Ace raising his rifle.

“Hold it right there,” Ace said.

Ben frowned. “What are you doing?”

“You remember what Bob said.”

“Before you shot him?”

“Yeah, before I shot him. He said that their saviors, the Shapeless, can take any form.”

“We already knew that,” Ben said.

“Yeah, well, now that we’re all getting more acquainted with them in action, how do we know these guys aren’t them?” Ace asked.

“Because I’m pretty sure they just fried ‘them’.”

Ace nodded. “Sure, but that would be a pretty good cover,” he said. “Don’t you think?”

“How the hell do we know *you* aren’t *them*?” said the man next to Ada. “I mean, it goes both ways.”

Ace sneered. “I’m not one of them, asshole,” as if that were actually proof.

Ben took a deep breath. Ace wasn’t actually wrong. This was the new reality. They couldn’t even trust people that looked normal anymore. Maybe they couldn’t even trust the person in the mirror anymore.

Still, sometimes you had to take a leap of faith. He looked at Ada. He took her all in, head to toe; then he laughed.

“You’re not wrong, Ace,” Ben said. “But I’m gonna risk it. Because I know a goddamned UEF Marine when I see one.”

He walked over and shook Ada’s hand. “I’m Ben.”

Ace lowered his rifle. “Ah, screw it.”

The man next to Ada shook Ben’s hand. “Tomas.”

“And I’m Ace,” Ace said.

Ada frowned. “That’s your real name?”

“Yeah, it’s my real name,” Ace said, as Ben stifled laughter. “Why the hell wouldn’t it be?”

Ada cocked an eyebrow. “No reason.” She looked back to Ben, seemingly sizing him up as he’d just done to her. “Seriously, though, who the hell are you guys? Military? Station residents? What?”

“None of the above,” Ben said. He glanced at Ace. “It’s complicated. We’re here looking for the *Atlas*.”

“You found it,” Tomas said, “Or what’s left of it.”

“That’s not the *real* reason,” Ace said. “At least not for him.” He motioned to Ben.

Ada again cocked her eyebrow. She was a badass, no question, but there was a little playfulness there that Ben appreciated. “And what’s the real reason, Ben?”

He hesitated. “I’m here looking for my dad.”

“Your dad?”

“His name is Ben Saito,” Francesca said, letting it sink in.

Ada looked shocked. “As in...”

“As in Captain Saito is his father,” Francesca said.

Ada stared at Ben. “Captain Saito. Captain Lee Saito.” She searched his face as he said it.

Ben nodded. “The old man is my old man,” he said, reciting an oft-heard joke from his days on starships where his father was captain.

Ada seemed to be at a loss for words for a moment. “Captain Saito is...” She hesitated. “I’m sorry, I don’t know how to tell you this, but...your father is dead.”

EPILOGUE

CAPTAIN LEE SAITO found himself in the stairwell of the luxury apartment tower in the UEF Annapolis Naval Base. Admiral Chevenko and the other officers, who'd attended the party celebrating his assignment on the historic *Atlas* mission, were there with him. All of them had rifles in their hands, but they were frozen. He was the only one who could move.

Saito made several attempts to try and get his comrades' attention. When he looked at their faces they were twisted, inhuman, as if they were once people whose visages had been melted. Scared and confused, he fell back on the stairs.

Motivated, driven by some unseen force, Saito looked up the stairs. Standing there at the top was his wife, Beverly. She almost glowed in her sundress, the same one she'd worn to the boardwalk on that idyllic day with their son Ben. She wore her usual smile, but here it made him sad, and he didn't know why.

"Beverly? What are you doing here?" Saito wanted to ask, but the words didn't come out. He climbed up the stairs on his hands and knees. His wife turned and walked out of view.

When he reached the top of the stairs, Saito didn't see his wife. She was nowhere to be seen. There was only a long hallway, but it wasn't that of his apartment building. It was the residential level of Sanctuary Station 33.

Saito stood up. He looked down the red-lit hall and felt an overwhelming dread, though he couldn't put his finger on why. His feet moved on their own, making him walk down the hallway slowly.

All the doors in the hallway were open. The first Saito passed, he looked in. He saw Ben, lying on the streets of Annapolis. Around him was

the wreck of a bombed train. One of his son's arms and one leg were badly mangled, and Ben was crawling towards him, towards the open doorway. Saito wanted nothing more than to go to him, help him, but his feet kept moving.

The next room Saito passed was in Ben's hospital room, only it wasn't quite the same as he remembered. Ben was in his bed; but instead of a window overlooking the city on one wall, there were only rows of artificial limbs, from floor to ceiling.

Ben sat up in bed and stared at Saito as he walked by. He didn't say a word. Saito could feel the anger in his son's eyes.

Room number three was dimly lit, with a single individual standing in it. Saito didn't know who it was, but they had a creepy aura about them. Panic set in as the individual, a bald pale man in all black, looked up at him. His eyes were pure black, shining, almost obsidian. And his mouth, his mouth was wider than was natural, not smiling but neutral.

Saito kept walking, unable to shake the feeling that the pale man was following him. He reached the end of the hallway, which turned into the inside of apartment 254. In the middle of the room, standing in a neat line, were the survivors he had left behind. There were Rollins, Ada, and Tomas.

Rollins smiled at Saito, covered in blood. It was unclear if it belonged to his longtime friend or not. Ada, the young UEF Marine private that Saito had taken a liking to during their debacle on the *Atlas*, was frozen in mid-scream, reaching out for him. Tomas, who he didn't know all that well, simply stood straight like a soldier, but with the same obsidian eyes as the pale man.

Saito felt a cold hand on his shoulder. It made him feel slimy on the inside. When he turned to see whose it was, he saw the pale man right behind him. Now that pale man smiled, which only made him more unsettling.

"Go. She's waiting for you, friend," said the pale man as he pointed with his free hand to Saito's right.

Saito walked towards the open bedroom doorway in the apartment; only it didn't lead to a bedroom, but to his apartment back in Annapolis. It was an apartment in an apartment, which didn't make sense; but nothing in this place did.

Standing by the windows of Saito's apartment was Beverly. She had her back to him. He once again tried to call out to her, but he couldn't. Instead

he walked up behind her and wrapped his arms around her waist. With his head on her shoulder, he looked out the windows she stared at.

Annapolis wasn't outside Saito's apartment windows. Instead he saw open space and the UEF *Atlas* floating in the distance. He could smell Beverly's perfume, a scent he thought he'd forgotten.

"Do you see it?" asked Beverly as she tilted her head to the side and rested it upon Saito's.

Saito couldn't answer. But yes, he saw it, or at least thought he did. Was she referring to the *Atlas*?

"It's beautiful, isn't it? Peaceful. The cold dark. It's...comfortable."

Saito didn't know what Beverly meant.

"I miss you," said Beverly, without moving her lips. It was like she took the words out of Saito's mouth. She turned around and kissed him, but her lips turned motionless and cold. He looked and saw lifeless, cloudy eyes inches from his own. His arms unhooked from around her waist. Her bluish-skinned corpse floated away. Behind her was the wreckage of their apartment after the Oblivion terrorist drone strike.

It was as if she'd died all over again. He was crushed. He fell to his knees and tried to cry out. No sound came out, only an aching in his throat.

Calmly, the pale man walked into view. He grabbed Beverly's floating corpse by her hand and started to dance with her. They spun circles around the absolutely broken Saito until the pale man let go of her and knelt down in front of him.

"Wake up, Lee Saito. We need to talk," said the pale man.

LEE WOKE in a room that looked something like a hospital room, but not really. Everything was a little bit off, like a cheap imitation of something real.

The bed had a mattress, sheets, and a pillow, but none of it was soft. The room itself was the correct sterile color and had the boring, depressing decor of a hospital room, but there were no windows and no doors.

Where am I?

Saito tried to get up. He was hit by sharp pains in his torso, one in his chest and the other his stomach. When he lifted the uncomfortable,

sandpaper-like sheet, he wasn't prepared for what he saw.

On Saito's chest was a blob of what looked to be something alive. It was flesh-colored, and moved like it had a mind of its own. Around the edges were the borders of an open wound. Was it some twisted form of bandaging, or was it a creature that had taken root in him?

Inserted in Saito's stomach was what looked like a slimy umbilical cord. Through the transparent sections, he saw some form of black goo pumping into his gut.

Saito pulled out the umbilical cord. It hurt worse than anything he'd ever felt before. Black goo spilled out and sprayed all over the ground. When he tried to get the thing off his chest, it kept morphing around his fingers, making it impossible to dislodge.

"I would leave it be. It's saving your life." A woman had appeared at some point in Saito's room. She was in an old-fashioned nurse's uniform. Her movements were erratic, like a film skipping frames.

"Where am I? What is this?" Saito was inexplicably on the floor now, and crab-crawled backwards from the nurse.

"He wants to talk to you. Come with me, please." The nurse approached one of the hospital room walls, which opened up like liquid metal.

Saito got up off the floor and followed the nurse, because...why not? What else was he going to do? How else was he going to find any answers?

Am I still dreaming?

Saito followed the nurse from room after room of scenes one might find on Earth or in one of the human colonies. From bars to school classrooms, each had walls that opened and allowed them to walk through. As he walked through, he saw unnatural-looking people who seemed as if they were trying to learn how to behave in each of these environments.

"Here we are," she said at last. It was a large room with a spherical ceiling and curved walls. Those walls and ceiling were made of churning liquid metal. Standing against it was a very familiar sight: it was what Saito saw every time he looked in the mirror.

"What is this?" asked Saito as he looked at himself. Only this other him was perfectly groomed and in an immaculate UEF officer's uniform, adorned with all the proper medals and bars.

"The future, Mr. Saito. Or at least, preparations for the future," answered the impostor Saito.

“Am I dead? Is this a dream? Is this hell?” asked Saito. His legs were still a bit wobbly.

“Dead? No. I assure you, you’re not.” Impostor Saito pointed at the wound on his chest.

Saito looked down at himself. He didn’t realize he was naked. The thing inside his chest wound was still there. Black goo still dribbled out of the opening in his stomach.

“We saw to that,” said imposter Saito with a smile.

“Why?”

“Why what?”

“Why keep me alive?” Saito asked. “Why do this? Pretend to be me?”

“Who said anything about pretending? For all intents and purposes, Mr. Saito, I *am* you. A better you.” He pointed at his head. “In here I have all the same memories.” He pointed at his face. “I share your face.” He pointed at his heart. “And I love who you love.”

“You’re a monster!” Saito snarled, his throat burning with the effort. It was so dry. How long had it been since he’d drunk anything?

“I’m a human, down to my very genes; only I’m also a little bit more. I’m what your kind can be. What they *will* be.”

“Why not kill me?” Saito asked.

“I need you, Mr. Saito. I need you alive. I need you to help me. To help us.”

“And why would I do that?”

The impostor Saito’s smile got wider. “You’re going to stay with us a little while. You’re going to help us make your kind’s transition a little easier. And to make that a little easier for you...” From the floor a small pillar jutted up and out. It was made of the same liquid metal as the walls of this strange room.

As Lee watched, the pillar turned into his wife. “Beverly...it can’t be... this isn’t real!” Saito trembled as his wife hugged him. She smelled exactly the same, exactly how he remembered.

“It’s as real as you want it to be, honey,” answered Beverly.

“This is just the beginning, my new friend.” Impostor Saito walked over to one of the walls and waved his hands. The walls parted, giving them a clear view of space and Sanctuary Station 33. “The beginning of a new age for humankind.”

Sanctuary Station 33 blew up, splitting right along its main axis, spewing debris into the surrounding space.

Impostor Saito turned back. “Are you ready? We have work to do.”

BOOK 3: FINAL INVASION

ONE

“AND YOU’RE SURE?” Ben asked Ada stupidly, as if he hadn’t clearly heard the Marine tell him that his father, Captain Saito, was dead. Even though he knew, somewhere in the back of his mind, that the likelihood of his father’s survival was slim, Ben had convinced himself that he’d save him.

“I...” Ada started to say, then stopped.

Ben could see she was struggling with something. “Well?”

Ada took a deep breath. “We heard his voice over the intercom, only ... it wasn’t him,” she said.

Ben was confused. “What do you mean?”

“It wasn’t him,” she said again, hesitantly. “It was one of them. One of the Shapeless.”

Ben felt like he’d been punched in the gut. “Are you sure?”

Ada nodded reluctantly.

“He sacrificed himself for the rest of us,” said Tomas. “He was a good man.”

Ada’s glance made Ben think she didn’t necessarily share that assessment. He felt all of his energy and drive leave his body. All of this had been for the sole purpose of finding his father. “How did he die?”

“He just...” Again, Ada hesitated. “He just walked out of the apartment.”

Ben looked up sharply. “What? Like he gave up?”

“He sacrificed himself for us,” Tomas said again, but again Ben could tell that Ada wasn’t agreeing. He glanced at the other *Atlas* survivors, but they all looked away.

“That doesn’t make any sense,” Ben said. “The old man was a stubborn bastard.”

“There’s something ... I think there was something that they were doing,” Ada said. “To draw him in.”

The others seemed to be caught off guard by this, like it was something she’d discussed with nobody else. “How so?” Ben asked.

Ada shook her head. “Just something about his demeanor. It changed right after one of the Shapeless touched him.”

“Touched him?”

“He was hurt in the escape. One of them gave him a sharp cut along his forehead. It was bleeding, but we were all hurt, so I didn’t think anything of it until ... until he left.”

Tomas was frowning. “I’m pretty sure one of them cut me.”

“Hell, I think one touched me, too,” Ace said, looking uncomfortable. “Shit, you blew up half the damn station, and a lot of them into pieces in the process. All of us might have been touched by them.”

Ada shook her head. “I don’t think they were after us. Not like they were after him.”

Ben wasn’t sure what to make of any of this. He felt weak on his feet, like a fighter waiting for the bell.

“Well, look, this is all fascinating,” Ace said. “But we need to get outta here, folks.”

Ada nodded. “Agreed. We got a lot of them, but no way do I think we got all of them.”

Ace nodded at the expended cold caster that Grimes had cast aside. “Do we need to get more weapons?”

“No,” said Ben firmly, pushing down his emotions about his father. Now wasn’t the time for that. He had to reassess his priorities and get them all to safety. “We’d have to double back. We’re getting off this station right now.”

“I like that plan,” Tomas said. He and Ada both looked to be in rough shape. They’d found cover in the cafeteria ahead of the blast, but they’d still taken the brunt of everything that had gone down to this point.

“HUD, call Morgan,” Ben said as he stood.

“Who’s Morgan?” Ada asked.

“She’s trying to get our ship up and running,” Ace offered.

“You’ve got a ship?”

“We do. Finest ship in all the galaxy, darlin’,” answered Ace.

“That’s what everyone told me about the *Atlas*,” Ada murmured.

Ben’s video call popped alive in his HUD as the group started moving.

“Yeah?” Morgan said with a fair bit of hostility.

“Everything okay down there?” Ben asked, caught off guard by her tone.

“Oh, you know, I’m trying to re-route power to the other engines, repair and reconfigure our nav systems, refuel, and oh yeah, I’m surrounded by literal corpses. So...yeah, everything’s ‘okay’ down here.”

“How long until she can fly?”

“An hour,” Morgan said. “Maybe two.”

“Cut some corners,” Ben said. “We’re coming back and we need to get off this station.”

“What? Why? Did you find your old man?”

Ben felt a knot in his stomach rise up, and he pushed it down. Now wasn’t the time. If his father really was gone, he wouldn’t want Ben to lose focus over it. There were few things that had upset the bastard more. “See you in fifteen minutes. You need to get that ship flying or we might be dead. HUD, end call.”

The group was hustling now. Ben was leading them at something between a fast walk and a slow trot. The fact was, if they ran into any of the creatures along the way, they were probably dead.

They ran past a hallway with outward-facing bubble windows. Several of the survivors gasped as they saw the liquid-metal sphere floating in space.

“It’s bigger,” Ada said. “It’s getting bigger.”

“And closer,” Tomas offered.

“How about we pick up the pace, Cap?” Ace said, right at Ben’s shoulder.

“Good idea,” Ben said.

But something told him that they might be too late already.

TWO

“I’M SO glad to see you guys,” Ada heard Francesca say. She was practically attached to Ada’s arm, and making it hard for her to keep up the fast pace that Ben was setting. She wasn’t sure how much she was onboard with this plan, but it was better than nothing.

“I’m happy to see you too. But why are you out here?” asked Ada. “Where’s Walter and Rollins?” She felt guilty that it had taken this long for her to realize they weren’t with them. “Do we need to get them?”

“They...they’re dead.”

“Dead? What do you mean, they’re dead?” Ada said, faltering in her gate and causing the other survivors in the line behind her to slow as well.

“He came for me, for us. And there was nothing... I was so scared.”

“Who came for you?”

“Captain Saito.”

Ada glanced forward to see if Ben had heard; but if he did, he didn’t react. He had enough on his plate without hearing about this. “Captain Saito? You mean, a Shapeless that looked like him?” she asked.

“Yeah, I think so. I mean.” Francesca wiped the snot from her nose. “I never met him before, but Rollins, he ... he called him that.”

“We really have to keep moving,” Ben said, noting they were slowing. Ada nodded and grabbed Francesca by the shoulder, and got her moving again.

“Did he say anything to you?” Ada whispered.

“He did... I dunno, I wasn’t really listening. I’m sorry.” Francesca started to break down in tears again.

Ada pulled her closer. “Nothing to be sorry about. You’re so brave. You’ve survived better than I ever would at your age.”

Ada was trying to be comforting, but she damn well meant it, too.

“SON OF A BITCH!” yelled Morgan. She threw a wrench halfway across the docking bay. Her frustration had reached a fever pitch as she couldn’t figure out how to get off the couplings and disconnect the *Lost’s* clipped wing from the ship’s electric and fuel systems. It was all she had left to do to make the vessel flyable again. Then she’d realized she needed the wrench.

“Hey, robot!” Morgan yelled at the station police robot that Ace had left behind for her.

“Yes, ma’am,” answered the robot in a monotone voice.

“Wanna get that for me?”

“Please specify.”

“The wrench! The one I just threw across the damn room!”

“Please specify.”

“Really?” Morgan sighed. “I dunno. You know what, never mind. I’ll get it myself.”

“Would you like an escort, ma’am?” asked the police robot.

“Sure. Why not?” mumbled Morgan.

“Sorry, please speak up.”

“C’mon!” Morgan tried her best to simultaneously step over and around the dead in the docking bay, while at the same time ignoring them. If she didn’t at least try to ignore the carnage, it’d drive her crazy. Maybe Ace could go skipping through it like a self-centered asshole, but Morgan didn’t have that same gene in her.

Behind her, Morgan could hear the police robot following. It had no reason to try to step over the corpses on the docking bay floor, so instead, it simply plowed through them. Morgan could hear the sickening crunch of bone and the squishing of body parts behind her. She thought she was going to throw up. Again.

“Okay, no, stop!” Morgan turned and put her hand up to the police robot. “Just watch my back from there.”

“Roger. I will observe your back, ma’am.”

Before Morgan went back to trying to retrieve her wrench, she happened to look out the plasma shield that separated the docking bay from space.

The impostor AIC fighters that had fought and helped take out the *Perseverance* were melding together like drops of mercury. They became a smaller version of the large, churning liquid metal sphere in the distance. What was worrying about that was that around the smaller sphere, orbiting it like satellites, were the missiles that those fighters were typically equipped with.

“That can’t be good,” said Morgan out loud to herself. “HUD, call Ben.” She turned around and ran back to the *Lost*. Retrieving the wrench suddenly became a whole lot less important.

“Got some good news for me?” Ben said, sounding out of breath. “We’re close.”

“Not really. You guys need to hurry up. Like, run back here. I think we might be in trouble.”

“We’re definitely in trouble,” Ben said. “You have no idea.”

“Yeah, well,” Morgan said, “I can see this damn orb thing in space, and —”

“It’s bigger and closer,” Ben said, cutting her off. That aggravated the hell out of her. “We know.”

Morgan had a welding torch in her hand, so she couldn’t exactly send the gesture she wanted to up to the heavens. In lieu of the wrench, and due to the fact that time was getting very, very short, she’d decided it’d be easier just to use a welding torch to cut off the electric and fuel lines to the clipped wing, then fuse them shut. It wasn’t ideal, but it would have to do.

“Fine,” she said, gritting her teeth. Morgan didn’t need goggles or a welding mask. Her artificial eyes didn’t need the protection. “It also looks to be pointing lots of missiles at us. But I’m sure you know that, too.”

Ben was silent. *Hey, looks like you don’t know everything, smartass*, she thought.

“We’ll be there in two,” he said curtly, and ended the call.

THREE

WHEN THEY REACHED the docking bay, Ben saw that the *Lost's* systems were all already activated. Morgan was cycling the engines, making sure those that remained were functional.

Ace rushed up ahead as Ben heard a gasp from the group, and turned around to see Francesca clinging to Ada and Tanisha with her hand over her mouth, looking terrified. Even Tomas was shaking his head. Only Ada continued forward into the bloody minefield of the docking bay with a grim look of determination.

She nodded over Ben's shoulder at the *Lost*. "That's it?"

"That's it," Ben said.

"Will she fly?"

"That's the plan."

Morgan was standing at the base of the extended loading ramp. She nodded at Ace, and he headed up the ramp.

"We can take off," she said. "I think. Not sure about ever landing again."

"We'll cross that bridge when we have to," Ben said.

"And when will that be?"

"When we get to Vassar-1," Ben said. "We ran into one of those Oblivion bastards, and he said that's where it all begins." He saw the look on her face. "Whatever the hell that means."

Ada, Tomas, Tanisha, and Francesca followed up the ramp as Morgan watched. She said nothing, and Ben again found himself impressed with her ability to compartmentalize and focus. In her shoes, he'd have a million questions. All she did was nod and say, "Everybody find somewhere to park

your ass and put on a safety belt,” as she pointed to the main level of the gunship, then smacked the button closing the loading ramp.

Morgan headed for the cockpit after Ace. Ben followed. He noticed Ada up ahead, heading for the cockpit too. “We got three seats up there. Stay back here with your people. Once we’re out of here, we can all make more formal introductions and figure out what the hell we’re doing.”

Ada nodded. She was a private, so Ben assumed she was used to following orders, although recent events had clearly changed the dynamic. She was a natural leader, too, but this was still Ben’s ship. She was going to have to live with that. She dropped back, clearly not happy about it.

When they got to the cockpit, the door had to be manually shoved open. “Not working,” Morgan said.

Ben and Ace exchanged a look. Ben settled into the captain’s chair. “Get us the hell out of here, Morgan.”

“Uhh,” Ace said, looking over the information panel next to his seat. “I got no data.”

“Yeah,” Morgan said. “Not working.”

Ben realized his was dead too. But Morgan’s, at the pilot’s nest, was working. That would do.

“Well, how do I, you know, fire our weapons?” Ace asked.

Morgan laughed. “Weapons,” she said. “You’re funny.”

She slammed the thruster arm forward. Nothing happened for a moment; then violent shaking started to run through the superstructure of the ship.

Ben again glanced over at Ace, who looked even more anxious than before. But that might just be the thought of not having any weapons available, even though, as Ben recalled, the *Perseverance* had stripped away most of their offensive capabilities anyway. For Ace, it must be like remembering that you were naked.

“So shouldn’t we be lifting off?” Ace said.

“Give it a minute,” Morgan said. “We have to bounce it.”

“What does—”

“Hang on,” Morgan said. She released what Ben assumed was a magnet hold on the deck, probably something she’d clamped on during repairs.

The ship lurched upward, but started to almost instantly drift sideways. Rather than correct, Morgan slammed the stick over hard and the right thruster assembly, which was dead, smashed hard against the deck,

bouncing the ship more or less straight again. It shot forward like a hovercraft on an uncertain surface. But just as it looked like the non-thruster side of the ship was going to slam into the deck again, she reduced the thrust in the other assembly and swung the stick back the other way.

They lost height quickly, and Ben heard the panic-inducing sound of metal scrapping against metal from the back of the ship, but then they cleared the lip of the docking bay floor and slid through the plasma shield exit. Once in space, Morgan fired the thrusters again and the ship, while not exactly flying straight, was more or less under control.

“See,” she said, taking a deep breath. “Easy.”

“Yeah,” Ben said, releasing his vice grip on his armrests. He was pretty sure his knuckles were white. “Easy.”

“Shit!” Ace shouted, pointing at the viewscreen.

Before Ben could look up, or even regrip the armrests, Morgan shoved the *Lost*'s nose over and dropped height. Ben finally looked up just as something hurled past.

“That was a missile,” Ace said.

“That’s a lot of missiles,” Ben said, now seeing the waves of incoming projectiles.

“Like I said,” Morgan replied.

Ben nodded. Like she said.

With the ship so crippled, it was a challenge for Morgan to dodge anything. She gritted her teeth as she slipped past one missile that came very close. Ben didn’t have data on his board, so he didn’t know how close. Without any remaining shields, if it connected, that would have been the end of the ship and its passengers.

In silence, Ben watched the destruction of Sanctuary Station 33. It would take hundreds of missiles to destroy it, but it didn’t seem that whatever was firing them at the station was hurting for firepower.

The churning sphere either didn’t see the *Lost* or didn’t care about her. Its full focus seemed to be on destroying the station, and for that, Ben was silently thankful.

Then he saw something that made his blood run cold.

FOUR

LEE SAITO SAT on the couch in his apartment, back in Annapolis.

What is this? How am I here?

His hands on his knees, he stared forward at a wall, also made from his memories of home. Sitting next to him was a creature who'd taken the form of his dead wife, Beverly.

Saito turned his head and looked at his wife. Blank-faced, she stared forward. Then she turned her head and looked at him. Her brilliant green eyes were almost the same, but there was something missing. A spark. A soul. That was what he'd fallen for so many years ago.

"I want to make you happy," said Beverly. Her words and smile seemed genuine, but they rang hollow.

"I know."

"So what can I do, Lee? What would make you happy?"

"I don't know if there's anything you can do," answered Saito. He turned back to the wall, trying to wrap his mind around what this was.

He jumped a little when he felt Beverly's hand on his thigh.

"I know that I'm not her, your wife. I'm a collection of memories you have of her. I'm the version you see in your mind whenever you think of her. I can't replace her, but I want to be better than just some...impostor. I want to be the next best thing. I want to be your peace, Lee."

Lee lifted her hand off his leg. "Only Bev could do that."

The impostor wife stood and placed herself right in his line of sight. "Look at me. Am I not the woman you remember? Touch me," she insisted. She grabbed Saito's right hand by his wrist.

“Stop it,” whispered Saito, but he didn’t pull away. He liked the warmth of her touch. He felt a wave of guilt rush over him.

“There’s nothing to be guilty about,” she said.

Something about the matter-of-fact way she said it registered with him. He felt his features harden as he pulled his hand away. “How did you do that?”

“Do what?” Beverly said.

“Read my mind. Shit, did you read my mind?”

“Of course,” she said, then seemed to realize that was the wrong answer. “I’m sorry, I...I’m still learning. We all are.”

Saito wasn’t sure what to make of her genuineness. “Your kind...can you all...?”

“No. Only the more...evolved of us. Those born after the Ruin.”

What in the hell is “the Ruin”?

“That’s a story for another day, Lee. We should wait until you’re more comfortable.”

“Please stop reading my mind.”

“I’m sorry. Of course I’ll stop.”

One of the walls of Saito’s faux apartment opened up. In walked his doppelganger. Beverly suddenly stood at attention, like an obedient soldier.

“How are things going in here?” asked the other Saito, the imposter Saito, with an easy smile under his perfectly-groomed mustache.

“We’re making real progress,” answered Beverly.

“I’m not speaking to you. I was speaking to our guest.” He turned his eyes to Lee.

Looking into the eyes of himself was uncanny. He looked perfect in every way. It was like looking in a mirror whose only purpose was to make you feel self-conscious and inadequate as yourself. Lee shook his head, but said nothing.

“I understand,” the imposter said. “All of this, it must be overwhelming and frankly a bit frightening. But it’s my hope, our hope, that you’ll be able to settle in.”

“Settle in?” Lee said. “What the hell is this? What are you expecting from me?”

“It’d probably help if you didn’t have to look at yourself every time we talked,” the imposter Saito said, again seemingly reading his thoughts. But this time, after talking to the imposter Beverly, Lee suspected it wasn’t just

a feeling. This imposter really was reading his thoughts. Maybe all the aliens could.

“One moment, please,” imposter Saito said, stepping back a little bit. His clothes stayed as Saito’s UEF dress whites, but the form inhabiting those clothes shifted and transformed into a pale, bald man, with no eyebrows and all-black eyes. “Is this better?”

“There’s nothing better about any of this,” Saito spat.

“I understand,” the Pale Man said with an irritatingly condescending tone. “Now, if you would be so kind as to follow me, it’s time to start our great work together, Lee.”

“Do you want me to join you?” asked Beverly.

The Pale Man waved her off. “No. You stay here. I’ll let you know when to plug in and help him out, but for now, stay.”

“I’m not going anywhere,” Saito said.

The Pale Man smiled and nodded. Saito rose to his feet. He felt his eyes grow wide. He hadn’t moved, but he’d stood like someone else was commanding his body.

“That’s better,” the Pale Man said.

Powerless to stop, Saito followed the Pale Man through the opening in the apartment wall. They entered another room that looked just like a UEF war room. As they passed by, he saw rows of UEF Navy soldiers sitting and watching an officer present the details of a mission, but the officer didn’t talk or make a sound. Still, the soldiers wrote things down on their tablets and looked to be paying close attention.

If Saito thought the first room was weird, the second was downright mind-bending. It looked like a docking bay, only there were no ships. Instead, there were soldiers standing around spheres of floating liquid metal. He couldn’t put his finger on exactly what was happening.

“I see you’re confused.” The Pale Man stopped. So did Saito. “This is why we need you. Our information on your military, the United Earth Federation, it’s not as extensive as that of the Allied Independent Colonies.”

“You need me to tell you what UEF ships look like?” Saito watched as the orbs of floating liquid metal transformed into what UEF short-range fighters looked like; only they were off. Not by much, but enough for a veteran like himself to notice.

“Yes and no,” the Pale Man said with infuriating vagueness. He kept walking.

“Because I won’t,” Saito said. “I won’t help you with anything.”
The Pale Man turned, and smiled without stopping. “You already have.”

FIVE

SAITO WAS COMPELLED to follow as the Pale Man entered a room where there appeared to be no walls. There was only space on every side. It was strangely beautiful. Standing in the middle of the room was a familiar face.

“Captain,” greeted Commander Jake Rollins. He was clearly younger than when Lee had last seen him. Rollins stood next to a strange-looking chair. It was hard to describe what was wrong with it, other than that it was alien. It gave Saito pause.

“Why don’t you take a seat, Lee?” The Pale Man wasn’t really asking. He was instructing Lee to do so, maybe even ordering.

“In that thing?” Saito felt uneasy. For the first time, he felt like he had some control over his actions since this all started.

“Sorry.” The Pale Man looked at the chair. It changed into something more relatable; it became an old-fashioned barber’s chair. The same exact chair, in fact, that Saito’s grandfather had had in his barber shop in Tokyo. “Is that better?”

The instant that he recognized it, Saito felt compelled to sit down. He realized that his familiarity with the surroundings had something to do with the Pale Man’s control over him. It was something, at least.

The chair was smaller than he remembered, but then again, he’d been smaller when he’d last sat in it. Rollins stood over him. Calmly, he strapped down Saito’s wrists with bands that appeared out of nowhere.

“What is this?” Saito asked.

“Please, try not to panic. This is the best way,” said Rollins soothingly as he started with the straps around Saito’s ankles.

“The best way to what?”

“I’m sorry for the restraints, Lee.” The Pale Man walked over into view above Saito. “But we’re entering some uncharted territory in your memory, and control can become ... an issue.” The Pale Man smiled lecherously.

“Having you simply telling or describing things to us is inefficient,” he continued. “We need to dive into your memories and see for ourselves. The human memory is unreliable when accessed by the person who owns them. Your minds distort things to fit narratives you build in your own heads. But your brain does record everything it sees, hears, and feels with remarkable accuracy when accessed by an outside party.”

“I’m never helping you,” Saito said.

“I wish you would reconsider,” the Pale Man said. “I really do. After all, we just want to see your race united and experiencing a never-ending age of peace. Look at these petty wars between yourselves. They fester and poison you against each other. Your race is further from harmony than ever. We want to rid you of this disease.”

“You must take me for quite the fool to buy into that,” Saito said, barely containing his anger. He wanted to scream and thrash in the restraints, but he didn’t see the point of that.

“I was really hoping it wouldn’t come to this, Lee. Truly. But I’m afraid we’ll have to threaten your remaining family if you don’t cooperate.” The Pale Man’s expression didn’t change.

Saito suddenly felt like someone was sitting on his chest. “What are you talking about?” he hissed.

“Your son, Benjamin Saito,” the Pale Man said, shrugging at the obviousness of it. “He’s out here looking for you. He was spotted on the station.”

Saito’s eyes widened. “But you destroyed the station.”

“Oh, don’t worry,” the Pale Man said, chuckling to himself. “We were very careful to make sure he made it away in time. We wouldn’t want to harm someone so important to you.” He leaned over close to Saito so he could whisper in his ear: “Not yet.”

He stood back up and patted Saito on the shoulder. “Rest assured, we have assets in place to introduce him to the Abyss at any moment we wish, but we don’t wish to do so. Instead we’d very much like to reunite the two of you. Would you like that, Lee?”

“You son of a bitch.” Saito tried to lunge forward, but the restraints hampered his attempts. “I swear, if you touch a hair on his head. I’ll kill all of you. Every single last one.”

“And I believe you mean that. Again, there’s no need for any of this to take place. Please, just sit back and relax so we can get started. This is so trivial for you. We aren’t asking you for anything top secret, Lee, it’s just a few cognitive exercises. Think of it as a game. And before you know it, we’ll have you and Ben back together again. Father and son, together.” The Pale Man smiled his hollow, mirthless smile. “Won’t that be wonderful, Lee?”

Saito drew back to spit in the Pale Man’s face, but before he could, a tentacle-like tube rose up out of the floor below the chair, slid around his chest, and attached itself to the top of his head. He felt metal biting into the top of his head and tried to scream, but nothing came out. His vision dimmed, and he passed out.

SIX

“AND YOU’RE sure that’s what you saw?” Ada asked Ben. He and the others in the cockpit had come down to the main shared space in the center of the gunship, where everyone else was sitting around one of the three tabletops.

Ben nodded. “After it blew up the station, that damn orb consumed it. I don’t know how else to explain it.”

He, Morgan, and Ace had watched in silence on the cockpit viewscreen as it happened.

“And it got bigger,” Morgan said. “The circumference grew proportional to the mass it consumed, I’d say.”

They all sat in silence for a moment, considering what it meant.

“Shit, that damn thing is huge now,” Ace said, stating the obvious with his usual panache.

“So where does that leave us?” Ada asked.

Ben ran his hand through his hair and glanced at Morgan. “That’s kinda what we’re wondering.”

Morgan hadn’t chosen to sit at the tabletop with the others. She was lying with her feet up on an old reclining couch that was built into the wall. She wouldn’t stay long. The ship’s autopilot was one of a billion systems not working shipwide, so she’d be needed in the cockpit soon.

Ben noticed the exposed pipes that lined the ceiling. The old gunship really did have a strange feel. He still hadn’t gotten a straight answer out of Ace or Morgan about the exact origin of the tough little craft. Morgan only said that they’d inherited it from the doomed Oblivion undercover mission on Earth.

“I guess introductions are in order,” Morgan said casually. She leaned back, her eyes closed.

“Didn’t we already cover that?” Tomas said.

“Well, maybe without the stress of alien invaders around us,” Morgan said.

Ace walked over and shoved Morgan’s legs down so he could sit on the other side of the couch. She scowled.

“Yeah, because we’re real people persons,” said Ace.

“Beats the alternative we’ve recently been introduced to,” Ada said.

Tomas rolled his eyes. “Okay. My name is Tomas Ruis, a UEF Marine. This here is Tanisha Grimes, UEF Navy.” Tomas pointed to Tanisha, who offered a wan smile. Next to her, Francesca was cleaning a cut on Tanisha’s arm. Tomas pointed to the teen. “And the young one here is Francesca. I actually don’t know her last name.”

“DeLeon,” answered Francesca in a small voice, without looking up. Of all of them, Ben felt like she was struggling with everything the most, although Tanisha didn’t look to be far behind in that department.

“And she’s Ada Ericsson,” Tomas said, “but you already knew that. What else do you need to know?”

Ben took Ada for the impromptu leader of the group, although Tomas seemed comfortable speaking for everyone.

“Ben Saito, formerly a lieutenant in the UEF Navy,” Ben said, motioning to himself.

“And lately, decidedly less so,” Morgan said with a smirk. “Although all of us are decidedly less so than what we used to be.”

Ben nodded. “The UEF isn’t a fan of ours, but we can get into that later. On the couch over there is Morgan Denis and—”

“Ace,” Ace said. “Just Ace.”

Ada raised an eyebrow.

“No offense,” Ace said, clearly not bothered by causing offense, “But I don’t trust you people.”

Ben sighed. “Morgan and Ace are former undercover cops—”

“What did I just say about details!” Ace said.

“What’s your problem?” Tomas said.

“My problem is that I don’t trust you people,” Ace reiterated.

“Is there a particular reason, or do you just not like people on principle?”

Morgan chuckled. “Bingo.” She stood up. “This has been fun, but ...” She glanced at Ben. “I think somebody needs to pilot this bucket.”

Ben nodded. He’d been expecting it.

“What about the autopilot?” Ace asked, in the dark as always.

“What about it?”

“Isn’t it working?”

“Barely,” Morgan said, walking up the stairs toward the cockpit, “or didn’t you notice we were getting by on shit and spit?”

“Shit, what *is* working on this boat?” Ace asked, exasperated. Almost as an afterthought, he offered, “Need any help?”

“What, and deprive you of the chance to make friends?” Morgan said over her shoulder. “I’ll be fine.”

Silence settled over the entire group for a moment before Ben said, “So, where were we?”

“We were all about to hold hands and sing, as I recall,” Tomas said. “I think Ace here was going to lead the chorus.”

“Screw off,” Ace said, offering Tomas the middle finger. “I know Ben just let it slide back there because he’s a big soft pushover, but I’m not just being an asshole for the shits and giggles of it. Our friend Bob back there —”

“Who’s Bob?” Tanisha asked.

“Oh, that’s one of the Oblivion cultists that Ace shot in the back of the head,” Francesca said matter-of-factly.

All eyes turned to her, then back to Ace.

“What? He had it coming,” Ace said. “The point is, once these things are fully seeded, whatever the hell that means, they’re nearly indistinguishable from human.”

“So you think one of us might be one of those things,” Ada said. “After all that?”

Ace shrugged. “I’m just saying it’s a long ride to Vassar-1 and we can’t fold jump. And call me paranoid, but I don’t want to be killed in my sleep and replaced by some alien asshole that looks like me.”

Ada stood up. “Ridiculous.”

Ace surprised everyone, including Ben, by hopping up from the couch lightning-fast and putting the barrel of his gun into Ada’s chest. “Sit down. We ain’t done talking yet.”

SEVEN

“SHIT, ACE,” Ben said. Tomas had his hand on the butt of his own rifle. Things could go sideways here quickly. “Let’s just cool down for a second.”

Ada took a long look at Ace, then nodded at Ben and turned around and sat back down at the table with the others. “Out of the frying pan,” she said under her breath.

Ace didn’t lower his rifle, but he did plop back down on the couch as if nothing had happened.

“Sorry,” Ben said. “But Ace’s friendly demeanor aside, we *do* need to figure this out first. Because honestly, you shouldn’t trust us either.”

Tomas nodded, like he’d been about to make that very point.

Ben ran his hand through his hair. “So how do we do that?”

Ada snorted in laughter. “Seriously? You guys don’t know?”

“We know plenty about the Oblivion,” Ben said, quickly recounting what he’d learned about the cult’s operations on Earth, along with their assumption that the cult had had something to do with the disappearance of the *Atlas*, and was paving the way for the aliens. “But that’s all we know,” he concluded. “We don’t actually know much of anything about these aliens themselves.” He paused. “Well, beyond what we just saw back there on the station, but hell if I can piece much together from that.”

“This is funny,” Ada said. “You’re giving us shit about being one of those things, but you don’t even know how to detect one?”

Ben forced an uncomfortable laugh of his own. “Nope, not really. Sorry.”

“You guys use fire, right?” Ace said. “I noticed you used phosphorous grenades back there, and flamethrowers. Right? I know fire. Look at my

face.”

He pointed at his scarred face with muzzle of the rifle, and looked like a crazy man as he did it, Ben thought. “Can you just put the gun away for a minute, Ace?”

Ace shrugged and put it across his lap instead.

“He’s right about that, at least,” Tomas said. “They hate extreme temperatures, or at least they avoid them. They seem to lose their ability to hold other forms.”

“Your father discovered it. Their weakness,” Ada said.

Ben felt something tighten in his stomach at the mention of his father. “So the Shapeless hate the hot and the cold. Hmmm.”

“You call them Shapeless, too?” asked Tomas, apparently just noticing the shared terminology.

“It’s what Bob called them,” answered Ben.

“Bob was a hell of a talker,” Ada offered.

“Until Ace killed him,” Ben said.

“Had it coming,” Ace reiterated. “All those Oblivion bastards have it coming.”

Nobody had anything to say to that.

“Okay,” Ben said. “So how are we going to do this?”

Ben looked over at Francesca, and thought about her helping Tanisha with her wound. A thought occurred to him. He walked over to the teenager and the injured cook. “Francesca, right?”

“Yeah?”

“Francesca, why did you stitch her arm?”

Francesca shrugged. “She asked me to.”

Tanisha nodded, rubbing the small bandage on her upper arm. “It was just a couple. Didn’t hurt.”

Ben nodded. “Sorry. What I meant was, why didn’t you use the flesh fuser? We should have one in our med kit.”

Francesca shrugged. “It’s all that was in there. A needle, some thread, a couple stim shots and some gauze.”

“No, there was definitely a flesh fuser in there. I would know. I used it myself before we left Earth.”

“Maybe you forgot to put it back?” she offered.

Ben shook his head.

“What does it matter?” Ace asked.

Ada seemed to grasp it right away. “It’s perfect for testing for Shapeless.”

The flesh fuser was a triage device to burn wounds shut. It was quicker than a needle and thread, and a longer-lasting solution than med foam. It was supposed to be used with a cooling topical ointment to limit the pain, but it was still a blunt solution for an emergency. And if the Shapeless showed their true form under extreme heat, it was a perfect, if painful, test.

“Seems like anything hot would do,” Tomas said.

He wasn’t wrong; there were other options. But the fact that the fuser was missing, and it was the one thing that the new people had touched on the ship, instantly put Ben on the defensive.

“I need to separate you. Now.”

EIGHT

MORGAN GLANCED AT THE AUTOPILOT, which was working perfectly fine, as expected. One of the perks of being the only one on the ship who knew her true condition. It was a perfect excuse to get a little private time.

She opened a secure connection, then set up a protocol to erase all traces of it as soon as it was finished. Another perk of knowing the ship inside and out. Then she ran a scramble program to ensure no transmission would be detected while it was in process, on the off chance that one of their new passengers was kitted out to detect such a thing, which she seriously doubted. But no reason to take risks now.

“HUD, open secure communication with IA-267.” Morgan glanced behind her as she waited for a secure connection to be made. From what she could see through the open cockpit doorway and down the hall, she was alone.

“Connection to secure line IA-267 established,” replied Morgan’s HUD in her head.

“HUD, call Director Engano.” Morgan whispered. “Increase speaker volume to ten.”

“Go,” a middle-aged woman’s voice answered from the other end of Morgan’s HUD.

“Space is deep, dark, and cold,” Morgan repeated the code word meant to identify herself as an agent in a hushed tone. Even secure lines could be hacked by those determined enough.

“Identification number?”

“5724.”

“Agent Moreno, I’m a little busy. Can this wait?”

From the sound of her voice and her surroundings, Morgan could tell Engano was walking. Morgan was aware, of course, that anyone else in her position would be talking to a lowly operative handler, but she wasn’t anyone else. “Unfortunately not, Madam Director. I have urgent information, and I don’t know when I’ll be free again to deliver it.”

“Okay,” Engano sighed. “Proceed. But make it quick.”

Morgan looked back again to make sure the coast was clear. She could hear Ace raise his voice and Ben doing damage control. Their inquiry into whether one of their new passengers was Shapeless must’ve been getting chippy, just as she’d planned. That’s why she’d mentioned it in the first place.

Morgan cupped her hand over her mouth. “Remember our worst-case scenario? It’s happening.”

Engano was silent for about five seconds. “Are you sure? Something like this, you absolutely need to be sure.”

“We found the *Atlas*. It looked like it was ambushed at the scheduled fold jump point before LeFleur could rendezvous with them.”

“By who?”

“The alien threat, ma’am.”

“You better have proof of that, agent.”

“I do. Hold on, I’ll upload my eye camera footage now. HUD, upload and send footage from optical one and two over this secure line to Director Engano. Confirm upload.”

“Upload complete,” confirmed Morgan’s HUD.

“Footage received,” confirmed Engano. “I’ll take a look a little bit later.”

“Madam Director, with all due respect, I think you need to see it as soon as possible.”

“I will. As soon as I can. But right now things are bit...hectic around here. Hold on. What is it?” Engano was clearly addressing someone other than Morgan. “I know. I’ll be there in a second, I’m on a call. No, it can’t wait, just tell them to hang on for a moment. I don’t give a shit if he’s a senator, he can wait.” She turned back to Morgan. “As soon as I’m done here, I *will* look it over, Agent Moreno. Now, if there isn’t anything else. I have to—”

“There is something else, ma’am. These ... this alien threat. They have the *Atlas*’ payload.”

“What? Are you sure?”

“I saw it with my own eyes, ma’am. The wreckage of the *Atlas*. I saw it in the sanctuary station’s docking bay before it was blown up. The rest of my crew was off trying to find the *Atlas*’ captain and crew as I checked the ship. According to the schematics we got, the payload was under the command bridge. Nothing was there, and the walls looked pried open.”

“Shit. That’s bad news, agent.”

“I know, ma’am.” Morgan quickly turned around. She saw someone coming up to the cockpit. “I have to go as well. We’re coming to Vassar-1. Please have my credentials ready.”

“Wait...what? That’s not the—”

“End call,” Morgan said as she turned her pilot’s chair around.

NINE

“WHAT THE HELL are you talking about?” Ada asked. She and Tomas instantly stood from the table. Francesca and Tanisha remained seated.

Ben pointed behind him at the cockpit. “We were all up there when we came aboard. You lot were the only ones back here that could hide the fuser.”

Tomas looked like he was going to lose it. “That’s stupid—”

“I think whoever got that med kit must have thought about how we could use that thing,” Ben said.

“But anything in here—”

“You heard him,” Ace said, jumping off the couch and to his feet now, too. It was funny how seldom he actually wanted to do anything Ben asked, unless it involved being an ass. He was waving his gun around dangerously.

“We aren’t going anywhere,” Ada said firmly.

Tomas crossed his arms.

“You want me to shoot them?” Ace asked.

“I’d like to see you try,” Tomas snarled. He and Ada were both armed, and though Ace was the only one with his weapon in his hands, neither Ada or Tomas looked particularly concerned.

“I gave you the benefit of the doubt the first time,” Ada said to Ace. “But I’m not doing it again.”

Ben frowned. “Just cool it, everyone. Nobody has to go anywhere.”

Did he really think they’d be okay with separating anyway? It was dumb. He’d just assumed he’d get more honesty out of a smaller group.

He looked at Francesca and Tanisha. “One of you got the kit first. Which one was it?”

“This is stupid,” Francesca said. The teen looked bewildered and scared.

“I did,” admitted Tanisha. “I saw it when we came in. Obviously I knew I was injured and grabbed it.”

“And why did you hide the fuser?” Ben asked steadily, watching her eyes closely.

“I didn’t hide anything!” Tanisha was sweating bullets. “The med kit opened up when I grabbed it. It’s probably somewhere on the floor.”

“That so?” Ace said, sounding less than convinced.

“Tell me a little about yourself, Tanisha Grimes,” Ben said. “Where are you from?”

“Atlanta,” answered Tanisha. “I grew up on East Apple, on the thirteenth level.”

“Where did you go to school?”

“Which grade?” Tanisha asked.

“Elementary.”

“Luther Elementary School on the twentieth level.”

“Do you have kids?”

“Three.” Tanisha wiped the sweat from her forehead. She wasn’t the only one, though. It was warm on the ship. Somewhere behind Ben, fans kicked on. With the ship running at full thrust and the fold engines offline, this was how it was going to be all the way to Vassar-1.

“Their names?”

“Portia, Dominique, and Harrison.”

“Ages, in the same order,” Ben continued.

“Really? This is—”

“Ages! In order.”

“Three, nine, and four. Happy?” Francesca asked.

“No, not at all.”

“This is ridiculous! I know her!” yelled Tomas.

“Yeah? Then help us,” Ben said. “Give her something that only the woman you know would know. Anything.”

“I’m not taking part in this sham,” Tomas said.

“Do it,” Ada said.

“What?” Tomas asked, looking around at her incredulously. “Are you serious?”

“The sooner you help them, the sooner this shit ends.”

“Fine. Uhhh, let me think...okay. What happened when we first met, on the *Atlas*? What did you give me? And why?”

Tanisha seemed to frown in concentration, searching for the memory. Ace raised his rifle, pointing it straight at her. Her eyes grew big, and fresh beads of sweat began pouring down her face. The entire front of her shirt was drenched now.

“Give her a second, asshole,” Tomas said. He put his hand on the butt of his own rifle.

“You were hungry,” Tanisha blurted out. “You were looking for food, said you hadn’t eaten breakfast and didn’t know when you’d get to eat again, especially since the kitchens closed in preparations for the fold jump.”

Tomas breathed a sigh of relief. “That’s right.”

“What did you give him to eat?” Ben asked.

“A pack of chocolate pudding. He said it was his daughter’s favorite. And if it was good enough for her—”

“It was good enough for me,” Tomas finished Tanisha’s sentence. “Happy? Is that enough for you psychos?”

Ace lowered his gun.

Ben took a deep breath. “Sorry,” he said at last.

“Bullshit,” Tomas said.

Ada shook her head. “This is ridiculous. We just need a test of some kind so we can get it over with. Like a sauna,” she said, thinking of her own tests when coming back from food runs. She wiped sweat from her brow. “Hell, it’s just about a sauna in here now.”

Ben nodded. “Yeah, thrusters maxed out will warm it up down here.”

Tanisha was shaking. “Can someone get me another stim shot? My arm feels like it’s on fire.” She was holding her hand over the stitched cut and pointing at the open med kit that was just out of reach.

“I’ll get it,” Ben said as he grabbed the stim shot from the kit.

“I can do it,” Tanisha said.

“No, I got it,” Ben replied, lifting her arm up and toward him. He was feeling guilty now.

Tanisha kept her hand clamped on the bandage. She was putting so much pressure on it that the edges were starting to curl up.

Ben knew he didn’t need to administer the shot right next to the wound, but there was something about the way she was holding it. He watched as a

bead of sweat slid down between her fingers and under the bandage.

As it slid out the other side, he saw a flicker of motion. The skin flexed out of shape, just for a moment. Ben wasn't sure what he'd seen, but when he looked up, he saw her eyes go wide.

Without hesitation, Ben dropped the stim shot and threw the med kit and its contents into Tanisha's face.

TEN

TANISHA JERKED BACK IN SURPRISE.

In the same moment, he wrapped his non-robotic arm around her neck, putting her in a headlock, then pushed off with his robotic leg, generating as much forward motion as he could. He extended his robotic arm, with all its piston-like strength, into her side and launched her across the room, against the bulkhead next to the airlock at the rear of the ship.

She smashed into it and seemed to momentarily go limp.

“What the hell are you doing?” Ada demanded behind him, but Ben was already moving again, grasping Tanisha by the collar and ripping open the airlock’s inner hatch.

“Somebody stop him!” Tomas screamed, but he was too far away to do anything before Ben shoved Tanisha in and slammed the hatch shut.

Ada reached out and grabbed Ben by the shoulder, spinning him around. “What the hell do you think you’re doing? She answered everything—”

She stopped and looked down. Ben had his blaster right into Ada’s stomach. He didn’t even remember unholstering it.

Ace had his rifle aimed at Tomas, who somehow managed to have his own out in all the confusion and was pointing it back at Ace.

“You two stay back!” Ace said, as if he had the jump on everyone.

“I saw it,” Ben said. “I saw her skin react.”

“What the hell are you talking about,” Ada said. She was looking over Ben’s shoulder. “Look at her.”

Ben didn’t turn around. He didn’t trust Ada not to try something. “I know you can’t see it. I barely saw it right up close. But it was there. It was clear as day.”

“I need to see it—”

“I’m not letting her out of that airlock,” Ben said.

“Bullshit,” Tomas said. His eyes were wild, like an animal’s. “This is bullshit. You can’t do this. You’re seeing things. You’re seeing what you want to see.”

“Isn’t it possible, Ben,” Ada said, trying to calm her voice. She slowed her breathing. “That you’re wrong?”

Ben stepped back, removing his blaster from Ada’s gut. His own back shoved up against the airlock hatch.

In the silence, Ben could hear noise. It was Tanisha, sobbing uncontrollably on the floor of the airlock.

“Please,” she said. “Please don’t do this.”

Ben felt sick to his stomach. Was he wrong? Was Tomas right? Had he just seen what he wanted to see?

No. I saw it. And I saw her panic when she saw me see it.

“C’mon, man,” Tomas said. He and Ace were slowly moving towards the airlock in what would look to an outsider like a choreographed move, with weapons pointed at each other as they went. “Does that sound like an alien monster to you?”

Ben took a deep breath. “No,” he said. “That’s what makes it so hard.” He slammed his robotic arm against the airlock panel to his right. The word “DEPRESSURIZING” flashed in red letters inside the airlock chamber.

“No,” screamed Ada, reaching for the panel.

But it was too late. Ben had started the airlock cycle. The outer door wasn’t open yet, but all the oxygen was sucked out of the chamber. He let the blaster drop to his side. Ada just stared at him in shock.

“You son of a bitch!” Francesca screamed as she lunged at Ace from behind. He shrugged her off with an elbow to the chin, but in that moment of distraction, Tomas managed to wrench the gun out of his hands and daze him with a stiff blow to the head with the butt of his own rifle.

He spun around and raised the rifle to shoot Ben.

“Tomas, no!” Ada screamed, jumping in front of Ben.

“Move, Ada!” Tomas said, tears streaming down his face. “I’m going to kill him. I’m going to kill that asshole.”

“No, Tomas,” Ada said firmly.

“He just killed Tanisha,” he screamed. “He just killed her.”

Ada just shook her head, saying nothing. Ben could see her shoulders rising and falling with adrenaline. His own heart was pounding.

Then he heard a small voice, echoing up out of the airlock behind him and through the intercom next to the hatch.

“I’m sorry,” it said. “I’m so sorry.”

Before he was sure it wasn’t just his imagination, Ben saw Ada’s shoulders tense up. She slowly turned to look at him. Tomas, too, lowered his gun, a look of shock and confusion on his face.

Ben turned around and looked through the small porthole on the airlock’s hatch. Sitting in the center of the depressurized chamber was Tanisha. She looked small and frightened, but she also looked remarkably unaffected by the lack of breathable air.

“I just wanted to be her. To be one of you,” she said, her voice cracking over the intercom speaker. “I really did. I mean that.” She looked up. “We’re so lost without you. Without this. Is it weird that I miss my kids? Even though they’re not mine?” She rambled in the airlock’s vacuum.

“Tanisha,” Ada breathed, putting her hand to the airlock window.

Tomas reached the airlock and stared in. His shoulders drooped. The rifle slid out of his grip and fell to the ground. “No,” he whispered. “No, it can’t be.”

Tanisha slowly unfurled and stood. Her human qualities were starting to break down. Her skin began to turn grey and sinewy, her limbs gangly and wrong-jointed. She was growing more alien by the second, but the face didn’t change. It still looked just like Tanisha.

She moved to the outer airlock door. “We’re not all monsters. Remember that. And know that he’s watching you, Ben.”

Ben felt the dryness in his throat as he said, “Who’s watching me?”

“Your father.”

Tanisha opened the outer airlock door and was sucked out into space.

ELEVEN

AIC INTELLIGENCE DIRECTOR Heather Engano stood at her ceiling-to-floor window on the top floor of the Voyager Tower, looking down at the living quarters that spread out below. Clad in only her bathrobe, she sipped on a glass of vintage Scotch. Each sip of the beverage that pre-dated man's expansion into the stars was more expensive than most of the transports flying across Vassar-1's skyline.

Reaching from horizon to horizon, the massive hypercity covered a third of the surface of its namesake planet. Another third was under massive greenhouse domes, and served as farms and water treatment plants. The last third was a wasteland. It was a rather unique rock.

How a planet as small as Vassar-1 had become the central power of the AIC was a story that historians would enjoy telling for generations. That Director Engano had played a key part in making it happen wouldn't feature in those stories: not now, and perhaps not ever. It would take generations of time and the revelation of many, many secrets. Even then, she doubted it. She was very good at what she did.

"HUD," Engano said before taking another sip. "What time is it?" Her artificial eyes lit up a light blue, and the time was displayed digitally in her line of view. The eyes weren't mandatory for all intelligence officers, and certainly not for her. Frankly, no rules were. But she'd come up through the ranks, and still identified with her people in the field.

That was the reason why prized assets like Moreno could contact her directly. Not that Moreno deserved it, exactly, but her father did, and Engano was nothing if not loyal to those who were loyal to her—and powerful enough to repay that loyalty. Moreno's father was both.

As usual, it was later than she expected. She was supposed to have met the defense minister almost an hour ago. Time was one thing she couldn't control. Maybe the only thing.

Most people would panic if they missed a meeting with one of the most powerful people in the AIC, but Engano wasn't most people. Funny how few people understood that true power lay in secrets.

"HUD, show me my notifications," Engano said as she took another sip. A holographic exclamation point appeared in front of her. There was a number under it: 1,132. "Show me notifications from Tier-3 and above."

The number reduced to just a dozen messages from those she deemed critical. Anyone else in her position might have a dozen messages from other members of the Intelligence Committee, but the last thing she cared about was what her fellow politicians thought. Her critical messages were all from operatives.

What do we have here?

The first message Engano opened was from an asset recently sent to infiltrate the UEF post-attack cleanup on Magellan 5.

ASSET "LUNAR SON" REPORT 234

As previously reported, the devastation is almost total. Only three hundred survivors on site. Found evidence of AIC weaponry, pieces of BOP missiles, 200mm dreadnought rounds and incendiary bombs. Serial codes are missing or non-trackable.

I have not ruled out the possibility of black market activity, though rumors of eyewitness reports citing dreadnoughts and fighters are pervasive. I don't know where pirates or terrorists could acquire a dreadnought.

I've expended twenty thousand in credits on getting feelers out to the wider distribution worlds. I'll send another update if or when I hear anything. Best of luck with the Senate until then.

Received April 3rd, 0600 hours.

THANKS, Garrett, but I don't need your luck. What I need is irrefutable proof that we didn't do this shit.

Engano finished her drink. She turned from the window to go and pour herself another glass, and was reminded that she wasn't alone in her apartment this morning. There were clothes strewn across the floor, and the smell of bacon cooking from her kitchen.

Dammit, I forgot he's still here. And he's cooking breakfast.

As she walked across her bedroom towards the door, an urgent message flashed up. Speak of the devil. It was her favorite power broker and occasional lover, Senator Thomas Moreno.

HEATHER? You up? The defense minister is here waiting for you, losing his damn mind. Get rid of your boy toy and get over here. He's talking all sorts of nonsense and the rest of the council aren't gonna wait forever. I'll see you here. GET A MOVE ON!

GOING AS FAST as I can, Tom. And your jealousy is both obvious and wearing thin.

Engano turned the corner and headed down the long hallway that led to the kitchen. The walls of the hall were video screens showing nature scenes from back on Earth. Like many on Vassar-1, she'd never been there, but found the ones playing videos from the ocean strangely comforting.

"Hey, there she is! Good morning, sleepyhead." A naked young man, about twenty years her junior, stood at the stove, cooking bacon and eggs. He turned, making only his bare behind, muscular back, and model-quality face visible.

"I had a lot of fun last night, Zeke," Engano said. "Now it's time for you to go."

"It's Zed," he said, not seeming that upset about the error. "And if you just hang on a second, I'll have this done—"

"I have your number, Zed."

As soon as she entered the kitchen, coffee was instantly dispensed from a tap on the far wall.

“But I....”

“Really.” Engano gave Zed a pity kiss. “It was great. You were great.”

She was about to sit down on her incredibly comfortable couch when there was some insistent knocking at her door. She moaned to herself as she went to the door. She didn’t need to guess at who would be standing there.

“Good morning, Stacey. What can I do for you?”

Stacey Walbruce, her personal assistant and secretary, cocked her head as she looked at the director’s bathrobe disapprovingly. “You’ve got to be kidding me.”

TWELVE

“YOU’RE NOT EVEN DRESSED, Madam Secretary,” Stacey said.

“It’s been a busy morning already.”

Stacey glanced at the empty Scotch glass, and Engano self-consciously moved it behind the door as she stepped aside to let Stacey in.

“I’m sure you know that you’re late for your Senate meeting, Madam Director.”

“They sent you down here, didn’t they?”

Stacey ignored her question. “I know it’s not a priority of yours, Madam Director, but it *is* on the calendar.”

Not following the calendar was something akin to murder and treason in Stacey’s world. The universe might be on fire, but it would have to find a slot in the calendar first if it wanted the director’s attention.

“I can see the headlines now. Senate shuts down in anticipation of intelligence director’s visit.” Engano said, setting her glass down on the foyer table. “You want a drink, Stacey? You seem a bit stressed.”

“I’ll pass, Madam Director. I’d also like to pass on telling the defense minister that you have to reschedule. I already did that for three other senators this morning.”

Zed walked in. He was fully clothed. He smiled and gave Stacey a friendly nod before turning to Engano. “Can I call you?”

Engano gave him a kiss on the cheek. “If you want to, sure.”

As soon as he was out the door, Stacey rolled her eyes. “Another one? That’s three this week. It’s not even the weekend yet.”

Stacey always judged. That didn’t bother Engano, though. In fact, she welcomed it. Her assistant did more than just schedule meetings and take

the calls she didn't want to; she was the conscience that Engano had lost on her way to the top. She'd given up girlfriends a long time ago. Stacey was the only person allowed to give her shit.

"I don't keep count."

"You're a hot mess, ma'am."

"Yeah," Engano got up. "I know." She made her way to the bedroom and got dressed.

Fifteen minutes later, they were on a hover transport.

"You know, no matter how many times I see it, I never get sick of it," said Engano as she stared out the window.

There were about ten other vehicles in the entourage. There was no such thing as traveling alone for Engano. It wasn't just the war and the UEF spies to worry about. Now they had the Oblivion to worry about, and for Engano and her people, it was a big worry.

Originally it had only been Earth that had to deal with the Oblivion cult's terrorist attacks. Some so-called experts thought it was because the members were opposed to the UEF's foreign policies and restrictions on their religion.

Engano's intel said something different. Her sources believed they were embedded scouts, native to the worlds where their true non-human leaders would invade. *Non-humans* was the euphemism she had to use because she couldn't bring herself to say *aliens*.

It seemed crazy. But even if the Oblivion were crazy, they were still dangerous.

She'd shared intel with her UEF counterparts through the backchannels that were available to two groups on opposite sides of a bloody war. She never knew if they were deemed credible. Engano still had her own reservations, but she'd learned a long time ago not to doubt her people without good reason.

"Never get sick of what, Madam Director?" asked Stacey, who wasn't paying attention. She was too busy sending messages back and forth to different government officials' offices, trying to repair the damage her boss had done this morning.

"The city." Vassar-1 was beautiful. Unlike the cities of Earth, there was room on this planet to spread out and expand, so there weren't the kinds of endless super-stacked buildings that humanity's cradle had. Certainly the skyline wasn't small; it befitted a powerful city. But there was abundant

green in the form of park spaces all over the city, built under a previous generation's green initiative, that were guarded and maintained by the proud inhabitants today. With the temperature stable at a pleasant twenty-two degrees Celsius all year, there were tropical plants, palm trees, and a wide variety of fauna that didn't have to endure the cold of a winter.

It wasn't just the green spaces of Vassar-1 that made it beautiful. Not tied down by the history and norms of Earth-bound architecture, everything on the AIC's capital planet was wholly unique. That, combined with its relative freedoms compared to the other colonies and especially to Earth, had resulted in a strong artistic community that made the homes, monuments, murals and structures of Vassar-1 beloved in the galaxy.

"All right, so if we hurry, we can get to the meeting with the defense minister and still have time to brief the Senate before the mid-day window closes," Stacey said. "Which we really need to do. Everyone knows—"

"Stop the car," ordered Engano.

"Madam Director?" the driver said, looking up from the hover car's controls.

"Stop the car, dammit!"

THIRTEEN

THE CAR STOPPED JUST beyond a small huddle of people next to the street. A bald man, dressed in what amounted to rags, was talking to, or maybe just preaching to, a crowd of orphans. The hover cars in the rest of the column came to a sudden stop.

“Wait...what? No! Why are we stopping? We’re on a really tight schedule as it is,” Stacey said, making little effort to hide her freakout.

“It’s fine, Stacey,” Engano said, waiting until she saw two of her security personnel outside her door before getting out. “This will only be a second.”

Engano’s eyes had to adjust to the bright light of Vassar-1’s afternoon sun, but once they did, it was clear the man was preaching to the kids. He was preaching the beliefs of the Oblivion.

“We can take care of this, Madam Director,” offered one of Engano’s security personnel. “You can keep moving, we’ll round these freaks up.”

“Freaks? Those are kids, Sergeant.” Engano crossed the street, not caring that it would stop traffic. No one honked when they saw the armed security that followed close behind her.

At first the bald man, clearly an Oblivion cultist with chalky black skin and one good eye, didn’t seem to notice Engano and the armed men with her. He kept preaching to his congregation.

“Do any of you precious children go hungry at night? Do you feel those pains?” The bald cultist pointed at his own stomach. “Do you feel those pains when you try to go to sleep and wish that there was some way to make them stop?” The man’s one-eyed gaze shifted from the children’s captivated faces to Engano. “Do you want an end to people hurting you for

no better reason than because they can? Because they have the power and you don't?"

"Hello, children," Engano said, careful to address the children first. She wanted to take them out of the equation. Yes, an assembly like this one was illegal, but she wasn't about to have kids arrested. Especially not orphans, whom she always had a soft spot for and whom, unfortunately, with the war, the city had a lot of. The kids all looked at her, almost at once, which was unsettling.

"Look, it's one of those with power, children. But don't be afraid, for you're being protected by the love of the Abyss." The man smiled at Engano with rotting teeth.

"The love of the Abyss, huh?" Engano only briefly looked at the cultist before turning her attention back to the kids. Her security, however, kept their stares firmly on the creepy bald guy.

The cultist nodded his head. "Exactly."

"Are you kids hungry? Looking for someplace safe? This man here," Engano pulled over one of her security officers. "His name is Sgt. Harryus. Sgt. Harryus is going to make sure all of you are fed and, if you want—nobody is going to force you, but if you want—you can stay at St. Janus Vassar Shelter for Children, over on 433rd Street. Would you kids like that? A roof over your heads? Food in your stomachs?"

Some of the kids, as Engano expected, walked or ran away. The sad truth was that Vassar-1 was far from perfect, and that included police and people of authority. There was good reason not to just automatically trust all of them. Thankfully, though, the majority listened to her and gathered around Sgt. Harryus.

"Ma'am?" asked Sgt. Harryus.

Engano felt a little bad, since he looked like he was drowning a little. "I know, just take them to some food stalls, use your service credit. I'll see to it that you aren't stuck with a bill or in any trouble. Then take them to the shelter and give the woman who runs it my name. She'll get them all set up. I really appreciate it. They will, too."

"You can feed their little bodies, yes. But can you feed their souls?" asked the bald cultist.

Engano was making her way through the kids when one caught her attention. It might've been her imagination, but something was off about the kid. Their face: it changed, swirled around for a moment—just a split

second—and then went back to normal. She figured it had to be her imagination.

“Everything is not what it seems. Is it? The universe just isn’t that simple,” the man said. He seemed to notice her hesitation, and smiled wider.

“Really? Because I think this is exactly what it seems to be,” Engano said. “First off, of course, you’re under arrest. Not only for openly spreading this, I don’t think I should even give you the satisfaction of calling it a religion, these poison words in public. But for doing so to kids. Street kids, at that. What’s your name?”

“Unimportant,” answered the man as one of Engano’s security personnel put magnetic shackles on him.

“You’re right. Unimportant. That’s what you and your kind are here on Vassar-1. We’ll get your name during processing, though. Don’t worry about that. You wanna tell me what you were trying to do with these orphans before you face the sentinels?”

“I was simply exposing these kids to the truth. I was preparing them for what’s to come. Would you like me to prepare you?”

The old man’s rotten teeth made his breath atrocious, but Engano held her ground. “And what’s that? What’s to come?”

“Heaven, Director Engano. Heaven brought by a baptism of fire and blood. It’ll be glorious.”

She frowned. “How do you know my name?”

The man said nothing. She was a public figure, but this man didn’t exactly look like he watched the news feeds.

“What baptism of fire and blood?”

The man started to answer when his head was blown almost completely off.

FOURTEEN

PIECES of the bald man's brain and skull were sent everywhere. Some blood splattered on Engano's face, but the direction of most of the gore was in the opposite direction, out the back of his head, which she assumed meant that whoever'd just shot him was behind her.

"Get down!" yelled Engano to all the civilians in the area. The security officer who was trying to arrest the cultist quickly zeroed in on where a flurry of gunfire was coming from. It was the second floor of a nearby building.

"Get those kids out of here!" yelled Engano at Harryus, who escorted the kids into the markets and away from the fighting. She took out her pistol.

Security personnel poured out of the vehicles that escorted Engano. They, too, engaged the shooters in the nearby building. There appeared to be multiple gun battles.

"We need you to leave, Madam Director!" yelled the security officer who was already with her. "Now!"

She didn't want to go. Then a high-speed super-heated round tore through the man's throat, nearly decapitating him in front of her.

Engano knew that her security would fight to the last to protect her. So the longer she stuck around, the more danger they were in. She knelt down and hurried back towards the convoy of transport vehicles that had brought her here. It was clear she was the target. How they knew she'd be here or would stop here, she hadn't a clue. That was a mystery for later.

Engano was almost back to her vehicle when she saw that one of the orphans was left behind, a straggler. Bullets hit the sidewalks right near the

scared little girl. Engano turned on a dime and ran for the girl.

“Don’t worry, I got you.” Engano grabbed the child and wrapped her up in her arms. She picked her up and kept moving towards the transports.

Engano didn’t know how it happened, but in the middle of the street, as she was crossing it, the little girl slipped out of her grasp. When she looked back to see where she was, the little girl’s face was expressionless. She was standing in the middle of the street. Before Engano could react, a driver in a panic from the shooting raced his vehicle right into the girl.

“No!” yelled Engano. She tried to go back for the girl, but was pulled back toward the transports by more security personal.

Engano relented, feeling sick to her stomach. She’d had the little girl in her arms, and she’d just melted away from her.

Engano kept staring at the little girl’s prone body, dead in the street, as she was hurried back into her transport. The moment the door closed, the driver gunned the thrusters and the hover car leaped forward.

But just as the little girl was disappearing from sight, Engano witnessed something truly shocking.

As the firefight continued and a security officer shot a small gun-mounted rocket-propelled charge at the building where the shooters were, Engano watched as the little girl sat up in the middle of the road. Her shoulders were misaligned; one arm hung broken and limp. Her head was split open. It was gruesome.

But then the broken little girl’s shoulders aligned themselves back to normal. Her arm wiggled a bit, then looked to be healed, and her head closed up. Engano watched with wide eyes as the girl’s expressionless face returned. Then she waved at Engano.

“What the hell was that!?” yelled Stacey, furious but also terrified. She was staring straight ahead. She’d seen nothing of what Engano had seen of the little girl out of her window. She was referring to the sudden attack in the streets.

Engano had something else on her mind when she said, “I have no idea.”

FIFTEEN

LEE SAITO FOUND himself on the streets of Tokyo. He hadn't been here since he was a child. When he looked down at himself—his arms, his legs—they were small, tiny compared to what he'd become. This was strange not only because he knew he was very much an adult, but also because he only seemed to have limited control over his movements. He was like a passenger in the mind of his child self.

Is this a dream?

If it was a dream, it was the most realistic one he'd even been in. The mega-supercity of Tokyo was exactly as he remembered it.

Saito even knew what his younger self was doing at this moment, and when this was. He was on his way home from school, having just been accepted into the Japanese UEF Naval School. Those same feelings of excitement and accomplishment bolstered his little legs as he ran through the streets of Tokyo's fortieth level.

Above Saito were eight more levels; above that, new construction on what would become an eighty-level city. That made Tokyo the biggest, most densely populated supercity in the world. Only Hong Kong and Moscow rivaled it.

Sparks from the growing Japanese capital fell through the levels above, making young Saito and other commuters on the elevated walkways dodge glowing projectiles that wouldn't actually harm them. To him it was fun, a game that most Tokyo kids played.

Young Saito saw something strange up ahead, standing next to a couple of street food vendors who were trying to lure anyone with a few extra credits to spend in their accounts.

A pale man stood in the middle of the walkway, hands in his suit pockets, obsidian eyes and mouth smiling at him.

“This is not a dream,” said the Pale Man as Saito ran past him.

As soon as Saito passed the Pale Man, he was no longer on the streets of Tokyo, but instead in his family’s apartment. He was in their kitchen. Everyone except his father prepared for dinner. His father, Sanada, knelt down at his position at the head of the table, waiting for his wife and children to bring him the food he earned for himself and them from working on the fleet docks.

“So what’s this big news you have, son?” asked Sanada. One of his daughters, Saito’s little sister, poured her father some hot tea.

“I got accepted into the Young Officer’s Program! I’m gonna be a commander!” young Saito said, happy as a pig in shit.

“Calm down, Lee. You have to do the work first to become a commander.” Sanada took a sip of his tea. “You think you have that in you, boy?”

“I know I do,” replied young Saito.

“That so?” Sanada stared at his son in a way he often did, a judgmental gaze.

It seemed that adult Lee, looking through his younger eyes, could almost read his father’s thoughts. He didn’t believe his son, a lifelong “B” student, had what it took to be more than what he was, and his father before him. He always assumed Lee would work with his hands, on the docks.

“You’ll do great, honey,” reassured Saito’s mother, Sakura. She put both of her hands, still wet from her work in the kitchen, on his small shoulders and kissed him on the top of his head. “I can’t wait to tell everyone that my son is going to command a fleet.”

“I would hold off on that. Let’s wait and see if the boy actually goes through with it. After all, he has a history of not following through. Remember Judo, Sakura? Remember the Explorer’s Club, Lee?”

“Stop it,” protested Sakura.

“I can do it!” Young Saito expected congratulations from his father. Getting into the UEF Young Officer’s Program was difficult. Only about three out of every thirty applicants were accepted.

“Hmmm. I’ll believe it when I see it, boy. In the meantime, help your mother clean those fish.” Sanada said it in a dismissive way that cut deep into young Saito’s psyche.

Young Saito bolted out of his family's apartment and made for the stairwell, ignoring his father's voice behind him. Floor after floor, young Saito ran up, crying along the way. Nothing was ever good enough for his father; *he* was never good enough. But at the same time, that was all he wanted to do: make Sanada proud. Or maybe, maybe he just wanted his dad to eat his words.

Young Saito finally made it up to the top floor of his family's apartment tower. There he saw the Pale Man standing near the edge of what was, then, not really a roof, but just a half-built floor of the building. The man stood where a wall hadn't been built yet, behind a piece of plastic tarp blowing in the wind.

"If this isn't a dream," asked young Saito as he approached the ledge, "what is it?"

"A memory, Lee Saito. We are reliving your memories," answered the Pale Man.

"How...why?"

"Like I said before, your own recollections aren't dependable. No human's are. But your mind, it recorded everything we need, accurately." The Pale Man turned to young Saito. "But we need you in here to help navigate. We need context for what we see and hear. I need you to help us be, well, like you."

"Why?"

The Pale Man's smile got wider. "Don't you worry about that now."

Lee wanted nothing to do with this sick game. He was determined to do nothing at all to help them. If anything, he'd give them incorrect information. Wrong data. Whatever he could do to subvert whatever the aliens were doing to him.

And yet. There was something in the young mind, the child's mind, that desperately wanted to please the Pale Man.

Lee understood on an intellectual level that it was something the aliens were doing to him, to make him receptive to their questions in the same way that they were dredging up these memories to relive. But he couldn't understand how to fight it off. His mind, like the small body he was in, wasn't his to control.

"Don't fight it, Lee," the Pale Man said.

Then he placed a strong hand on Saito's back and pushed him off the ledge.

SIXTEEN

INSTEAD OF FALLING off the building into the Tokyo levels below, Saito landed on his stomach on the mats of the UEF Training Center in Hokkaido. He was dressed in gym clothing and staring at said mat, and at a line of other young recruits, watching, secretly dreading their turns.

Young Saito got up off the mat and turned to his opposing fellow student. The other kid had just thrown him onto the floor, which naturally bred some anger in the pre-teen. Instead of their trainer, a UEF officer whose name wasn't important, the Pale Man was in the uniform, barking orders to the others while, at the same time, talking directly to Saito.

"I see you were yet to be the warrior you'd become. What was it that held you back, I wonder?" The Pale Man watched as young Saito wiped the blood from his mouth and got in his stance to go again with his fellow student.

This time, instead of getting his arm caught after an errant punch, young Saito shot for the other student's legs. Taken by surprise, the other student didn't know what to do. He got picked up and thrown down hard on his back.

Full of anger and rage, fueled by embarrassment and the disapproval of his father, young Saito mounted and just started punching the other student. He got lost in his frenzy and just kept swinging. Half of his punches hit their mark; the others slammed into the mat. It didn't stop until the Pale Man pulled him off.

Young Saito found himself in the office of the Hokkaido UEF Training Center's head administrator, Colonel Tenzan. He looked down at his swollen hands, both broken, twice their normal size. Tears rolled down his

cheeks as his father, in the chair to his left, talked to the colonel. His mother, in the chair to his right, tried to comfort him by gently rubbing his back.

The Pale Man paced back and forth behind Colonel Tenzan. “You failed your first time through. Interesting.”

“Why are we reliving this?” asked young Saito.

“It’s not only important to learn about your military, but about what drives human beings. We need to understand you, Lee. To do so, we need to understand your failures as well.”

“I understand, Colonel. Sorry for any trouble my son may have caused you,” Sanada apologized. He roughly grabbed young Saito by his arm and practically dragged him out the door of Tenzan’s office.

When he went through that door, young Saito aged by about twenty years. He was on the same docks he and his father worked on. Saito was helping put the finishing touches on a UEF fighter’s fold engine. The war with the AIC had just started and ships, supplies, and manpower were in desperate demand.

The Pale Man closely observed not only Saito, but the other workers as well. It looked as if he was trying to figure out how humans built their ships, and trying to pick up any details that might’ve been integral to making their own versions appear authentic.

There was a loud horn, and yellow lights around the docks started to flash. That meant that it was the yellow group’s turn to take their lunch break. With a yellow band on the sleeve of his work uniform, Saito dropped his tools and made for the cafeteria. The Pale Man walked beside him.

“The war. It had already started at this point?” asked the Pale Man.

“It just did,” answered Saito as he made his way, alongside thirty or forty other fellow workers in the yellow group, towards the cafeterias. “A couple of months ago.”

“And you hadn’t signed up yet?”

“No. I couldn’t.”

“Why not?”

“I had a family to take care of,” explained Saito. He took out a small holo disc from his pocket and handed it over to the Pale Man.

The Pale Man pressed the small button in the middle of the holo disc. Out of it was projected a small holographic photo of Saito, with his wife Beverly and their four-year-old son, Ben.

“Interesting,” commented the Pale Man. “You sacrificed what you wanted to do in order to provide for your family. It’s a selfless act.”

“Any man would do the same. Or any decent man, I suppose.” Saito stopped and looked up at a projected TV screen showing the news. It was a report from the battlefield with the AIC. The war was still young, and things hadn’t become as bitter, costly, and brutal as they would. Not yet. In himself, Saito felt guilty. He felt like he should’ve have been out there fighting.

“Some would not make the same choice?” This seemed to confuse the Pale Man. “And human beings, they have a choice whether or not to fight?”

“We did, at least at first. But in a couple of years the draft would come.”

“Were you drafted?” asked the Pale Man as he and Saito entered the cafeteria. “Is that why you went to war?” Quickly, the Pale Man’s attention shifted to the line of workers, waiting patiently for food with trays in hand.

“No. I signed up voluntarily.” Saito went to sit down at one of the cafeteria tables. Suddenly he found himself in his bedroom, sitting down not on the cold steel of a cafeteria table but on the edge of his bed. Beverly lay in the bed next to him, sitting up against the headboard. She urged him to lie down next to her.

“It’s okay, baby. I’m not mad. I won’t pretend that I understand why, but I’m not mad.” Beverly had been surprisingly understanding after Saito had just informed her that he’d signed up for the UEF Marines.

“Is it?” asked Saito. He put his legs up on the bed and moved back, sitting up against the headboard next to his young wife. “I can’t help but feel like, I don’t know, that I’m abandoning you and Ben.”

“Don’t worry about us, Lee. We’ll be fine. You wanted this since you were a kid, right? I’d rather have you risk your life out there in the war than spending another minute being miserable working those docks just to make sure there’s food on our table.” Beverly stroked Saito’s thigh.

“I’m going to worry about you two. How can I not? You’re my family.”

“Then why’d you go?” asked the Pale Man. He stood at the end of the bed, really killing the intimate vibe of the memory.

“I felt like I had to,” Saito answered.

“But what about doing what you had to, to provide for your family?”

“I figured I could serve a couple tours of duty out in space as a Marine, then reapply for officer’s school. As a Marine, I could make more than I did

at the docks. When I was an officer, I could move my family out of Japan and start a real career that would make sure that they were taken care of.”

Beverly put both her hands on Saito’s cheeks. They were cold. She turned his head towards hers, making sure they made eye contact. “It’s gonna eat you up inside if you don’t at least try. Just don’t die. If you die, I swear, I’m gonna kill you.” She forced a laugh.

“I promise. I will be back.”

Beverly smiled. And then she slapped him hard across the face.

SEVENTEEN

WHEN HIS VISION came into focus, Beverly was gone. He was staring up at another UEF Marine, Pvt. Jake Rollins.

“Wake up, Saito!” yelled Rollins. He looked around. Ships flew past overhead. The sounds of gunfire and explosions were everywhere. Rollins looked panicked—no, not panicked, alert.

“Wha—?” Saito sat up. He was in full Marine uniform, including his head-encompassing helmet. His own heavy breaths became condensation on the strong plastic visor.

“We need to keep moving! Take out that battery, or those transports are going to be shot out of the sky!” Rollins picked up a belt of high-explosive charges.

“Yeah....yeah, yeah!” Saito got up off the black soil of Europa, Jupiter’s moon. He picked up his rifle and his belt of high explosives. Both he and Rollins had one.

“You okay?” asked the third Marine who’d been ordered to storm the AIC unit-air battery. For the life of him, Saito couldn’t remember his name.

“So this is human combat?” The Pale Man stood not far away, in the middle of the fighting. He looked around.

Across the vast alien landscape, the Pale Man observed the battle unfolding all around him. Streaks of orange and red light, super-heated high-velocity rounds, flew all over the place. Fighters and bombers from both sides screamed by overhead, dropping payloads, peppering the battlefield with their guns, the unfortunate crashing down in fiery wrecks.

The Pale Man took in the sounds of gunfire, explosions, people screaming orders and for help. He looked down at an AIC soldier, holding

his own guts in that steamed in the cold Europa air. He saw one man get cut in half by a fighter ship's high-caliber cannons. He watched as a cutter grenade was thrown in a trench, exploding into a ring of plasma that beheaded the trench's occupants. He wasn't fazed, just fascinated.

"This is human suffering and savagery." Saito answered the Pale Man first, then the Marine whose name he forgot. "I'm fine. C'mon, let's go!"

Saito, Rollins, and the unknown UEF Marine charged across the battlefield towards a series of three anti-aircraft guns. The railguns blasted UEF ships out of the sky, and would do the same to the reinforcements coming in. Almost a hundred men would die if the guns weren't taken out before they arrived.

Perhaps Saito had forgotten the third Marine's name because he didn't make it very far. He took a super-heated bullet to the face. It easily cut through his helmet's visor, burst through his face, and came out the back. Immediately he fell to the black dirt, dead as could be.

Rollins and Saito kept moving. Lee remembered the crunching noise as the projectile passed through the Marine's skull.

Saito and Rollins ran as fast as their booted feet could take them. An artillery shell fell between them, sending both young men flying in different directions. Saito's whole world became hazy. He couldn't hear anything but a high-pitched ringing in his ears. His insides hurt; that was the only way to describe it, like someone had punched all of his organs. Still he got up, once again picked up his gun and explosives, and continued on.

"Why? Why keep going? You were clearly hurt. And as I can see, people are dying all over the place. So what if a few transports get blown up? It's just more wood on the fire, is it not?" The Pale Man was fascinated that Saito kept on mission.

"Because I could. Because I wasn't going to just let those people die if I could do anything about it!" Saito yelled as he ran towards the anti-aircraft guns.

When Saito reached the anti-aircraft guns, he was surprised to see, once he got over the ledge of the crater the railgun was situated in, fifteen or twenty scared AIC soldiers. They were nothing more than kids, barely older than he'd been when he went into UEF Young Officer's School.

Saito and the young AIC soldiers stared at each other for a moment. Neither side seemed to want to make a move; they just wanted to live. Then

Saito saw one of them point their gun in his direction, and he opened fire. The Pale Man watched and smiled.

The same feelings, a confusing mixture of anger and guilt, overtook Saito as he shot every one of the young AIC soldiers in that crater. Not one of them was spared. All that stopped him from breaking down, there in that moment, was the objective at hand.

Saito armed and threw the belt of high-explosive charges at the anti-aircraft gun. It blew up in a spectacular explosion that the Pale Man watched with glee. Seconds later, a UEF bomber came swooping down, somehow evading the other two anti-aircraft guns' fire, and blew them to kingdom come.

"Jesus, Saito." Rollins arrived hurting just as much as Saito, at least physically. Saito stood at the edge of the crater, looking down at the young AIC soldiers he'd shot. Some of them were on fire from the anti-aircraft gun he'd blown up, but one that wasn't ablaze caught his attention. "I dunno how you pulled that off. You're a damn hero."

Saito ignored Rollins and slowly slid down into the crater. The young AIC soldier he was focused on had something clasped in his dead hands. When Saito pried them open, he found a relic of the distant past, a Polaroid. After seeing what it was of, he fell backwards, sitting next to the young men he'd killed just minutes earlier.

"What was it?" asked the Pale Man. The creepy alien walked through the fire and stood over Saito. "The picture, what was it of?"

"This kid's family," answered Saito. He cried under the cover of his helmet. "All this kid had to hold onto before dying, in this hell, was a picture of his family."

"I've learned all I needed here." The Pale Man held out his hand. "Come, let's move on."

EIGHTEEN

“SO, you think you can do it?” asked Morgan. She’d just shown Ada the basics of flying a raider-class gunship like the *Lost*.

“No, absolutely not,” laughed Ada.

Morgan let go of the piloting stick. “Sure you can. You’re the smart one in the group. I can tell.”

The autopilot was damaged, but Morgan had managed to rig the ship to follow one of Vassar-1’s navigation beacons.

“Takes one to know one, I guess,” laughed Ada. “But if I was smart, I wouldn’t even be here.”

Morgan liked that Ada didn’t shy away from the compliment, but she didn’t care for the self-doubt. There was enough doubt in the world without adding your own. “Thought you said you were drafted?”

“I was...but I could’ve run. A lot of people back home did.”

“Where are you from again?” asked Morgan. “Your accent, can’t quite place it.”

“Sweden, a small town just outside Stockholm.”

“And you think they’d let you run?”

“Lots of people did. Swedes, we, well, war isn’t our forte.”

Ada stretched her back. She had just spent the last couple of hours bending over so she could see all the pilot instruments Morgan showed her. Morgan had gone over more than just the basics, because she could tell Ada was taking it all in, but there was still plenty more to know. Still, if what she’d learned wasn’t enough, they’d be in serious trouble.

“Considering you’ve survived this long, I gotta think you’re pretty good at it.” There was a brief, awkward silence. Without the common ground of

learning the ship's controls, they didn't have much to talk about.

"So, do we have any idea how we'll be getting into Vassar-1 space undetected?"

"Ben and I were just talking about that."

"And?" Ada asked

"And we won't. There's only one gate into the planetary shield. We aren't getting through it undetected."

Ada frowned. "That seems like a problem."

You have no idea, Morgan thought. The only hope was the credentials that the director had given her. But those would only work if the director validated them, and Morgan wasn't entirely sure that the director was willing to do that. Not while the director suspected, as Morgan did, members of their own services.

"We're small and agile," Ada said, nodding at the controls. "At least, you make it sound that way. Can't we just slip by?"

Morgan smiled, and hoped it didn't seem condescending. "We're small and agile, but not *that* small and agile." She shook her head. "They're going to see us coming, and we need to figure out what we're going to do then."

In fact, while they couldn't avoid detection, she believed the tiny gunship *could* get past the gate if it had to. But that would send up all kinds of alarms, and Morgan would have to call in favors she didn't want to think about. Not yet, anyway.

Ada nodded, and was silent for a moment. "So...tell me about your captain," she inquired at last.

The change in topic momentarily disoriented Morgan. "Ben? Our captain?" She laughed in spite of herself.

"What?"

"Nothing, it's just....He's our captain, sure. but he's the least captain-y captain of all time. If that makes sense."

"Kind of. What do you mean?"

Morgan swiveled around in her chair. "He's our captain because I don't have the patience to do it *and* have to fly this thing. And Ace, well, he's Ace. We needed someone with some experience, too. And connections. And money. And—"

"So wait, you just used him?" Ada asked.

"You could say that, sure." Morgan felt a little uncomfortable, and figured she looked it, too. "Considering where Ben was from, who his dad

was, and his war experience, we thought he was the perfect choice.”

“So he just came along?”

Morgan rubbed her heads together. “Well, we kinda kidnapped him.”

Ada snorted to herself. “I should have known. As soon as I think I have something figured out, I’m wrong.”

“Welcome to the club.”

“So you said ‘we’ a second ago. Do you mean it was just you and Ace before?”

“What? Yeah, exactly.” Morgan almost slipped. She never slipped her cover, but there was something about Ada. The young Swedish Marine was easy to talk to. “Ace and I can actually work together, you know, if we *have* to.”

Ada smiled diplomatically. Morgan had a feeling she’d already gotten the measure of Ace. With a guy that shallow, it didn’t take long. He wore everything on his sleeve.

“Back to your kidnapped captain,” Ada said.

“I’m going to regret telling you that, aren’t I?”

Ada smiled. “I’ll keep that to myself. But what I really want to know is, can I trust him? Is he a good man?”

The implication that Ada already trusted Morgan wasn’t lost on her. She had to take a second to think. What were her feelings on Ben? Honestly, beyond the needs of the mission, she hadn’t given that much thought. Ben was easier to get along with than Ace, but that wasn’t saying much. He was smart. He could be condescending, but he usually got it right in the end. He was, for the most part, a good person, but something haunted him; that much was obvious. Lots of somethings, it seemed.

“He’s a good man. He can be a bit childish at times, but when it counts, the true him comes out.” Morgan got up out of her pilot’s chair. “Why don’t you take a seat, see how it feels? I’m gonna go check on the rest of our motley crew.”

Morgan made her way out of the *Lost’s* cockpit. She needed a little space from Ada, whom she liked, but who was forcing her to get in touch with actual human feelings a little too much. It made her feel soft.

She entered the ship’s shared space. Tomas and Ace were sitting on the wall-installed couches talking about weapons systems. Without hearing more than a couple of sentences, she knew it was obnoxious. Neither of them were who she was looking for.

“Where’s Ben?” asked Morgan.

“I dunno,” answered Ace. “In one of the quarters. His, if I had to guess.”

“Thanks, Ace,” Morgan said. “Always helpful.”

“You think an induction thrust assembly could actually be used as a weapon against these things?” Ace asked. “Because this crazy bastard seems to think so.”

“We do need something other than conventional weapons against these things,” Tomas offered.

Morgan stopped to think for a moment. It was true; they had to start thinking outside of the box. She was impressed with Tomas for that. She was even more impressed that he was managing to put Ace’s skills to use.

“I think it’s not a bad thing to think about. We’re going to need every idea we can get soon enough.”

“You think we’re flying into trouble?” Tomas asked.

Morgan shrugged. “Been a good bet so far.”

NINETEEN

MORGAN LEFT Ace and Tomas to argue the merits of their proposals. Personally, she wasn't betting on anything stopping these things. At least, nothing she'd seen yet.

But that didn't mean she was giving up.

There were just three sleeping quarters on the *Lost*, made for six occupants. Only big enough to fit a bunk bed and four feet of head room, the quarters were cramped. Morgan only slept or spent time in them if she absolutely had to.

Morgan knocked on the door of Ben's typical quarters. Things were a bit in flux with their new visitors. There was no answer, so she opened it up, expecting to see Ben sleeping in there.

Instead, she saw Francesca lying down by herself, looking bored. She must be watching something on her HUD feed, Morgan thought, since she didn't even seem to notice her presence.

Morgan resisted the urge to disturb the teen. She needed a few moments away from all this. They all did.

Morgan closed the door and racked her brain as to where Ben could be. There weren't that many places; it wasn't a large ship.

She did a quick scan of the other two quarters and came up empty. He certainly wasn't in the cockpit or the shared space. That only really left one option.

Morgan made her way into the fold jump engines carefully. She knew the ship well, better than anyone, but even she would prefer not to mess with too much back here.

She made her way through the main assembly and to the small tinker room, as Morgan called it. It was barely bigger than a closet, but it allowed access to the rear section of the jump engines.

Historically, on raider-class gunships like the *Lost*, this room was used to store things you didn't want others to be able to scan for, since it was within the engine's energy halo. Say illicit goods, or a prisoner. Morgan wasn't above using it that way herself.

On the *Lost*, there was nothing so exciting. Just a couple plastic crates full of rations and water, and Ace's personal supply of homemade hooch, which could strip paint off an engine. In the back of the tinker room was a loading ramp fold-out that lead into the main bay. Morgan could just make out a small light below it.

Maybe it was the spy in her, or simple curiosity, but Morgan wanted to know what Ben was doing without him knowing she was there. She knelt down and quietly approached the opening in the floor. The closer she got, the more uncomfortable she felt. What had she thought Ben was doing here? Was she maybe hoping to find out that he, too, was secretly in contact with someone? A spy like her? Did she think she'd find him engaged in some secret, deeply disturbing conversation?

What she heard was deeply disturbing, but for all the wrong reasons.

Ben was crying.

He was sitting at the bottom of the small space, holding a tiny holo-image projector in the palms of his hands. Whatever he was looking at was blocked by the back of his head, but she could tell from the movement of his shoulders that he was struggling to hold the image up as he stared at it. She suspected he'd prefer to bury his head in those hands, but he kept holding whatever image he was looking at.

Morgan felt like shit. From the moment that Ada had told him his father was dead, Ben had seemed different. He was on edge, the opposite of emotional. He was almost robotic. He was correct about the girl who'd been a Shapeless, but that didn't justify the over-the-top way he'd handled it. He'd clearly been hurting and holding it all in.

The fact was, Morgan had known Ben's father was dead from the moment they'd laid eyes on the shattered pieces of the *Atlas*. She'd assumed that Ben had known that, too. Logically, maybe he did, but he was clearly still holding out hope, and now that hope was gone. No one could hold that emotion in forever.

Morgan quietly got up to her feet, walked back through the tinker room and into the engine room proper. Then she called out to him.

“Hey, Ben! You in here?” Morgan waited a few seconds, then loudly and obviously made her way into the tinker room.

“In here!” Ben yelled out. His voice was slightly hoarse, though she doubted she would have noticed if she didn’t know to listen for it.

Morgan appeared over the opening in the floor. She raised an eyebrow. “Checked your quarters, you weren’t there.”

“I’m just taking a look at the fold jump engines. See if there was anything I could do so we didn’t have to suffer through this long-ass journey again.”

The both knew that wasn’t true. If Morgan couldn’t figure it out, hell if Ben could.

“I figured we’d get a hotshot engineer on Vassar-1 to take a look,” Morgan said.

“Yeah, well, figured we could save some credits,” Ben said lamely.

“Ha,” Morgan said. “They all love telling a woman how to fix her ship. It won’t cost me a dime. I’ll just have to play as dumb as they think I am.”

“I bet that’s not easy,” Ben said.

Morgan was happy to see a small smile return to his face. “You have no idea.”

“Anyway, there wasn’t much else to do,” Ben said.

“Unfortunately, there is. We’re getting close to Vassar-1 space, and we have two UEF personnel on board. We need to change their clothes and—”

“Take out their chips. Yeah, I know.” Ben finished Morgan’s sentence for her. She hated that, but gave him some slack, considering his circumstances. “I just wanted to give it some time, especially since I blew one of their buddies out the damn airlock.”

“I think you gave them all the time we can afford. If an AIC fighter happens by us on recon, or a simple perimeter sweep of their space—”

“They’ll detect those chips. You’re right. Well, let’s get to it then.” Ben did it again. A second time, Morgan had to bite her lip.

Suddenly, a klaxon sounded. It was muffled in the tinker room, but no less recognizable.

“Proximity alarm,” Morgan said. “I think the time for subtlety is over.”

“Agreed,” Ben snapped. He looked like a different person as he climbed to his feet and shot past Morgan like an uncoiling spring, leaving her

chasing on his heels.

TWENTY

BEN EMPTIED HIS MIND. He'd done it before, and he'd just have to do it again. He was embarrassed that Morgan had had to come searching for him, but he would have been more embarrassed if she knew what he was really doing down there.

He thought about the holo-image again and almost tripped. He shoved the images out of his mind.

Focus. Now is not the time.

He rushed into the cockpit with Morgan on his six, and was surprised to find Ada in the pilot's seat.

"What do we have?" Morgan asked Ada.

"I have no idea," Ada said, sounding bewildered but not panicked. "I think we're being hailed."

Morgan nodded and reached over her shoulder to flip up a data screen. "You got a crash course on piloting, but that didn't really extend to comm systems." She glanced at the hailing frequency.

"Who is it?" Ben asked.

"AIC, clear as a neutron star. Ada," Morgan said calmly, "I'm going to need you to go below decks with the captain."

Ada's bewilderment deepened. "Why?"

At this point, Ben felt bad for what was to come, and he could tell that Morgan felt the same.

"Just do it, Ada," Morgan said. "We can't have you up here."

Ada rose slowly, and looked like she was about to say something else, when Morgan slipped past her into the pilot's nest and flipped off the proximity alarm.

“Trust me, Ada,” Ben said. “You need to do this.”

She looked far from convinced, but Ben trusted she would come. He turned and walked out. After a moment, he heard her fall in behind him.

“What’s going on?” Ada asked.

Ben didn’t really want to talk about it until they were with Tomas, too. “I didn’t know you have piloting experience.”

“I don’t,” she said. “Unless you could be on the bridge of the *Atlas* once.”

Ben raised an eyebrow. “I don’t think many would.”

Ada agreed as they came down the steps and into the main shared space. Tomas and Ace were sitting on the wall-installed couches, in animated discussion.

Both men instantly stopped speaking and looked up at Ben. His stride was purposeful.

“What’s up? What’s going on?” asked Tomas.

“AIC patrol. We’re here a little sooner than I thought.”

“That makes one of us,” Ace grumbled. It was amazing how quickly one got accustomed to fold jumping.

“Ace,” Ben said purposefully. “It’s time.”

Ace grimaced. “Sorry, bud. Nothing personal.”

He grabbed Tomas by one arm.

Tomas was understandably confused. “What’re you—!”

Using his artificial arm, Ben grabbed Tomas’ other arm. The ex-UEF Special Forces member was a big strong boy, and needed two people to restrain him.

Ben took out a knife. “Long story short, the UEF chipped you when you enlisted. We need to get it out. Right now.”

“The hell you are,” Ada said, stepping forward.

“I hate to tell you, but you’re next,” Ben said, shrugging.

“Is all this necessary?” asked Ada.

“It is,” answered Morgan. She’d slipped in behind Ada. “And you both know why we have to do this the hard way. Those chips will pulse if we try to deaden the nerves around them. And with a patrol already wandering around out there sniffing up our asses, we can’t have that.”

“If we’d pulled them while we were in UEF space—”

“Then we’d be tagged by the UEF just as quick,” Ben said. What he didn’t say was what he’d been feeling since he’d joined Morgan and Ace,

which was that he was beginning to trust the AIC more than his own government, or maybe distrust it less. “We’ve waited as long as we can.”

“Shouldn’t you be flying?” Ace grunted to Morgan.

“We’re at full stop. If those assholes want to shoot us unprovoked, we didn’t stand a chance anyway.”

“All the same, I want you back up there quickly,” Ben said.

Ada crossed her arms. “How about you, Ben? Didn’t you used to be UEF? Don’t you need yours out, too?”

Ben showed her the underside of his flesh and bone forearm. There was a small incision scar where Ace had cut the chip out a while ago.

Ada shook her head. “I keep wanting to give you guys the benefit of the doubt, but the way you just—”

“Just do it,” Tomas said, turning up the underside of his arm.

“Morgan?”

She stepped forward and touched her temple. “One sec, just got to switch the vision mode. HUD, X-ray filter.” With one finger pressed against Tomas’ skin: “Cut here.”

“Okay, deep breath, man,” instructed Ben. “On the count of three. One, two—”

Ben plunged the tip of his knife as gently as he could into Tomas’ arm.

To Tomas’ credit, he didn’t scream out or make any noise other than grunting. But the veins popped out of his neck and his teeth gritted. His arm shook a little bit, but Ben’s robotic one did a good job of keeping him stable.

“Almost there. Almost...” Ben focused intently as he tried to maneuver the knife through the blood spilling out.

“You got it. Now, slowly, move it out,” instructed Morgan. She, Ace, and Ada watched as Ben pushed the tip of the knife up as it was nestled under the UEF chip. They all could see as the chip pressed against the inside of the skin on Tomas’ arm.

“Got it!” Ben popped the chip out; it fell onto the floor of the *Lost’s* shared space. He immediately stomped it into pieces.

Ace immediately took out the ship’s med kit and wrapped Tomas’ arm tightly in gauze. Ben turned his attention to Ada.

“You ready?” asked Ben.

“No,” answered Ada honestly.

“Yeah...” Ben sat down next to Ada. He pulled her arm under his metallic one and squeezed, trapping it. “Morgan, maybe it’s better if you do it. I’ll hold her still.”

He handed over the still-bloody knife. Morgan wiped Tomas’ blood off on her pants; then she got ready to get to work. “This is gonna suck, but I’ll be as fast as possible as well.”

Ada nodded and closed her eyes.

Ben found Ada’s response to the pain, like Tomas’, impressive. Other than her gritted teeth and tensed muscles, she barely budged. He’d like to think he’d do as well as the two Marines, but he knew better.

“Easy peasy,” Ace said. “Can we go fly now?”

TWENTY-ONE

MORGAN GAVE ACE THE FINGER, then sauntered back toward the cockpit with Ace following her. She refused to move faster, and could feel Ace chafing behind her.

“Are you trying to get us killed?” he growled.

“Are you?” she countered. “Just calm the hell down. I said I could get us there, and I will.”

“This is crazy,” Ace moaned. “I can’t believe we’re going to Vassar-1.”

“You had a chance to speak up.”

“What was the alternative?”

“Exactly,” Morgan said as they entered the cockpit. “So shut up.”

By the time Ben slid into the command chair, Morgan was waiting for the inevitable. Ada and Tomas stood near the entrance, out of the way, but clearly still wanting to be involved some. Only the teenager was nowhere to be found. “Did anyone check on Francesca?”

“She’s in the quarters,” Ada said. “I vote we leave her there. I don’t see any reason to upset her.”

All of them watched as two AIC fighters came into view beside and slightly in front of the *Lost*.

“Yeah, some upsetting stuff out there, all right,” Ace said under his breath to Morgan. “You better have some magic up your sleeve. I don’t know how the hell we’re going to live through this.”

Morgan flipped open her comm. “Want me to hail them—”

Just then, the comm squawked, and a notification appeared in the viewing window. “Right on time,” she murmured. “Incoming message.”

“Put it through the speakers,” Ben said.

A man's stern voice resonated over intercom. "This is the AIC *Raven*. You are entering AIC space without proper tags or identification beacons. Identify yourselves."

In the distance, Morgan saw Vassar-1. On one of the screens in the pilot's nest, she was able to enhance the image. Her artificial eyes were also able to zoom in further and see a long line of ships and frigates waiting to be allowed into the planet's atmosphere, past the shields surrounding the large rock.

Morgan feathered the thrusters, moving subtly in the direction of the gate.

"What are you doing?" Ben said.

"Relax," she said. "I know these bastards. We need to keep them on their toes."

This better work, Director. Don't screw me over when I'm this close.

"Okay, Clearance number 893B54F. I repeat, 893B54F."

"Please stand by for verification," said the AIC pilot. "Stop your forward progress."

Morgan didn't acknowledge. Instead, she added a bit more thrust.

"Where'd you get the clearance number?" asked Ben.

"I have my sources."

"Your sources?"

"Yup, that's what I said."

"Is it...how old is it?" he asked.

"Good question."

"Good question? Did you ask your sources that good question?" Ben asked.

Morgan ignored him and feathered the thrusters a third time. They were moving at a good clip now.

"I say again, stop your forward motion," said the AIC pilot, his voice clipped and hard. "Or we will not hesitate to fire on you."

You've already hesitated to fire, asshole. Just hesitate a little longer.

The AIC fighters were falling back now, holding their positions relative to the gate. She'd been counting on that. The *Lost* didn't have any weapons beyond the flak guns, so fighting their way planetside was out of the question.

But outrunning them was another story.

“Attention, unknown ship, your clearance code is out of date. Please state your business on Vassar-1 or turn around immediately. I repeat, state your business or leave Vassar-1 space, or we will engage.”

Morgan sighed. *Dammit, Heather!*

“Your sources, huh?” Ben’s tone was that of a man annoyed.

“What are we gonna do?” asked Ace.

“We can tell them the truth,” suggested Tomas.

“What truth would that be? We’re here to warn your government that an alien threat of shapeshifting monsters is coming your way? I’m sure that’ll go over well,” Ace said.

“Here’s what we’re gonna do,” Morgan said. She flipped on the comm. “Understood, AIC *Raven*,” she said. “We were given two codes in our cargo agreements. Please try clearance number 8CCB54F. Thanks and sorry for the bother.” She killed the comms.

“What code was that?” Ben asked.

“Who knows?” She shrugged. “I just made it up.”

“So what—”

“I think you need to go below decks and get the kid and bring her up here,” Morgan said to Ada.

Ada jumped up and shot out of the cockpit.

“I don’t like the sound of this,” Tomas said.

“Attention, unknown ship.” The AIC pilot’s voice was sharp now. “Your clearance code is not acceptable. Slow to a stop *now*.”

Morgan swung lazily past a few straggler freighters making their way toward the line outside the gate.

Finally, a little cover.

As she slipped under the biggest one, she opened up the thrusters, no longer trying to hide her intentions.

Ada came back in with an annoyed Francesca behind her. “What the hell is going on?” she said as she took a seat.

An alarm flashed a moment before a pair of energy beams rippled through space just ahead of the ship.

“Shit, they’re shooting at us!” Ace hollered.

“No, they aren’t,” Morgan said. “It was a warning shot. They wouldn’t miss if they were.”

“Next time they won’t,” Ben said.

“Agreed,” Morgan said. She tightened her grip on the piloting stick.
“Get strapped in, everyone.”

TWENTY-TWO

“THEY GAVE YOU A MEDAL?” asked the Pale Man.

The inside of the spherical ship changed and morphed all around them, adapting to Lee Saito’s memories as the two of them went through it.

Lee knew he was sitting in a nondescript chair in front of the Pale Man. His mind told him that was true, but his eyes told him a different story. The chair had been refashioned into one he remembered from his childhood.

The Pale Man put his hand on Lee’s forehead, like he was checking for a fever.

Back in the memories, Saito was standing on stage behind a UEF general. The general was addressing a group of press and military members who’d gathered on Europa after the UEF’s victory. He couldn’t make out what was being said, but felt it was about him.

“They did,” answered Saito. “They rewarded me.”

“Interesting,” the Pale Man said. He stood on stage with him.

The general presented Saito to the audience. “Private Lee Saito!”

Nervous at that point, and never good with crowds at his best, Saito slowly walked up to the podium. He looked out at the audience, which had completely changed. Instead of reporters and military, they were all the dead young AIC soldiers.

The dead slumped in the audience chairs, jaws slung open. Blood covered their uniforms, holes gaping in their chests, stomachs, and heads. Lee felt their cloudy dead eyes gazing back at him.

“This isn’t right,” said Saito in a whisper as he stepped away from the podium, shaken. “This never happened.”

“Are you sure? Sometimes the human memory is—”

“This is like something out of a horror movie,” Saito said firmly. “Not real life.”

“Or out of your guilt? This system, this technique, it isn’t perfect. Tell me, why did you feel guilty about killing them? Were they not your enemy?”

“Yes, but...” Dead AIC soldiers were now on stage with Saito, surrounding him. Their dull eyes didn’t blink. No breath escaped their lips. He felt cold, and could feel his own breath quickening. He was starting to panic. His vision blurred.

“Very well.” The Pale Man grabbed Saito by the arm and gave him a good yank.

Saito blinked, and he was back on Earth. He was at Bev’s childhood house in Virginia, the one her parents still lived in. He knew it well. They were marking his return home from his tour.

“What is this?” asked the Pale Man as he walked around, closely observing everything.

“A barbecue.”

“A what?”

“A celebration.” Saito found himself sitting on one of the lawn chairs outside. On one side of him sat Beverly’s father, Cal, nursing a beer. The chair on the other side of him was empty.

“So are you happy to be back home, son?” asked Cal before taking a sip of his beer.

“I’m not sure yet,” answered Saito in a quiet voice.

“What’s that?” Cal said sharply.

“I’m very happy, sir,” Saito said.

“I can’t imagine what you boys go through out there. Fighting those ungrateful ingrates...on behalf of our whole family, I want to thank you. Thank you for your service.”

Saito wasn’t listening to his father-in-law. He was too busy staring past the grill, past the table of food, past the barbecue attendees mingling and talking. He was staring at the edge of the nearby river at the end of the lawn. The kid, the AIC soldier with the Polaroid, was standing there staring back at him.

The Pale Man appeared in the chair next to Saito. “It looks like this one doesn’t want to go away. That’s intriguing. Why? Why can’t you let that dead soldier go?”

“I don’t know,” Saito choked out. His throat was dry.

“Why this memory? Don’t get me wrong; I enjoy seeing your kind in your natural habitat, enjoying a gathering, but what brings us here?”

“I’m not doing this, you are,” Saito whispered.

“Only you know,” the Pale Man said.

Saito did. He could feel it. The words tumbled out of him. “It’s the day I decided I didn’t belong anymore.”

TWENTY-THREE

“WHAT DO YOU MEAN?”

“I wasn’t...my life as a civilian, as a normal person, enjoying life, enjoying the little things...” Saito stared at the dead AIC soldier. “That was all over. I was more comfortable at war than at a damn barbecue.”

“Dad! Look what I found!” Saito saw his son Ben running up to him, holding a frog by its hind legs.

Saito held out his arms to receive his son. “Get over here. Let me see that.”

Once Ben was in his arms, Saito was no longer sitting down. Now he was standing on a boardwalk.

“See? Is that so bad, honey?” asked Beverly. “Showing a little affection?” There was a smile on her face as she half-teased him.

“Thank you, dad!” Ben separated from his father’s embrace, holding a toy model of a UEF dreadnought.

Saito should’ve been happy. He remembered being happy that day. But now, relieving it, he felt absolutely nothing inside.

“This seems like a nice memory,” commented the Pale Man as he walked out of the crowd on the boardwalk. He was eating cotton candy.

“It was right before I went off to the Naval Academy,” Saito said. “After my transfer went through. It was also the last time we ever did anything as a family.”

The Pale Man took another bite of his cotton candy. “But you’re not enjoying this one?”

“It’s...it was a good day. But it reminds me of what I lost.”

“Can we play some more games?” asked an excited young Ben.

“Sure, champ. Of course we can. Let’s see if we can get you a stuffed animal.” Saito kept Ben immediately in front of him as he walked hand-in-hand with Beverly.

“This is nice, isn’t it?” Beverly didn’t look at Saito as she spoke. She looked around at the carnival-like atmosphere they walked around in.

“Yeah.” Saito was only half paying attention to his wife. He wasn’t fully there. He never was those days. All he could think about was the war, and being on a ship or holding a gun in his hand.

“Baby? Honey? Are you here today?” asked Beverly. She squeezed her husband’s arm tightly.

Saito was focused on a clown, juggling for a group of captivated kids; only the clown wasn’t juggling balls or bowling pins. He was juggling grenades and what looked to be human eyeballs. The clown stopped, as if he knew that he was being observed. He stared back at Saito, letting the grenades and eyes fall to the wooden boardwalk.

“Lee?” Beverly looked at the side of Saito’s head, concerned.

“What?” Saito tore his gaze away from the clown. “What’s that, hon?”

“I asked if you were here with us today.”

“What do you mean? Of course I’m here with you right now.”

“I don’t mean physically.”

“Mommy, look! A clown!” Ben was thrilled to see the grenade- and eyeball-juggling creep.

“You’re right, that is a clown,” Beverly answered her son lovingly.

“I wanna go see the clown!”

“No, no clown.” Saito was wary of it. He turned to the Pale Man, who walked next to them, finishing up his cotton candy. “Something’s very wrong here. That’s not what happened.”

“Oh, let him go see the clown,” Beverly said.

“No clown!” yelled Saito, loudly enough that everyone around them stopped in place and stared at them. None of the other boardwalk attendees moved.

“Lee...?” Beverly could see her husband was causing a scene, but she didn’t acknowledge how freaky the other boardwalk attendees were acting.

“What is this?” asked Saito. “Why did this go from a memory to a horror flick?”

“Sorry about that, Mr. Saito. Here, is this any better?” The Pale Man waved his hand and the other people at the boardwalk turned back to

normal, went about their business.

“I’m sorry, I just...” Saito knelt down. Ben was crying. He hugged his son. “Let’s go see a clown, buddy.”

Ben wiped the tears from his face. He smiled a grin missing a couple of baby teeth and ran towards the clown, who had a big bag slung over his shoulder.

“Ben! Slow down!” Beverly tried to slow her son down, but her efforts were in vain. He was already at the clown, talking to him, but he wasn’t far away. Both parents could clearly see him.

“I’m sorry, Bev.” Saito apologized again.

“I know.”

“You know, but...?” Saito could feel that there was a second part coming.

“But it’s getting worse. Your temper. Ever since...ever since Europa, you’ve been different.” She paused. “You’re not the man I married.”

“I’m the same me,” Saito said, but he knew that was a lie. Everything was different now. The dead haunted him.

Bev shook her head. “I’m proud of you. So damn proud. But I have to think of Ben first. I have to think of our family.”

“What are you saying?” asked Saito. They were almost over to Ben and the clown.

“You can’t come back again like this. I’m going to divorce you. Ben and I will live with my parents,” she said. “I’m sorry. This isn’t because I don’t love you, because I really do. But I love him more.” Beverly left no time for Saito to respond. She knelt down next to Ben.

Saito stood there, frankly shocked. He knew that things had been a bit rocky since he’d gotten back, but he’d never heard a threat like that, ever. Not from Beverly. She was his rock. And just days before going to UEF Naval Officers’ school for the second time, his rock had just gotten dislodged from the steady wall of support he’d enjoyed for so long.

“Tough break there, buddy,” said the clown. When Saito got a good look at the clown, he saw the Pale Man in makeup and a costume. The Pale Man smiled at him, then turned to Ben. “Do you like lions?”

“I thought...I always remembered this as a great day.” Saito stood there, a bit confused. His own memory: was it playing tricks on him, or was the Pale Man? Were his memories being messed with, or was this accurate and he’d just told himself a pleasant lie for all these years?

“Here ya go.” The Pale Man handed young Ben a stuffed animal, a lion. “King of the jungle for the king of the boardwalk.” He looked over to Beverly and Saito. “You’re such a good-looking family, would you like a picture? No charge, the old-school way.” From the big bag slung over his shoulder, the Pale Man took out a Polaroid camera.

Saito and Beverly stood next to each other in front of the boardwalk’s wooden guardrails. They both had one arm over the other’s shoulders. Their other hands were on Ben’s shoulders, who stood right in front of them holding his stuffed lion.

“Say cheese,” instructed the Pale Man. The family gave the camera hollow, dishonest smiles.

The camera spat out the picture, and the Pale Man handed it to Saito. It was an image of the AIC soldier holding his own Polaroid and staring back at him.

TWENTY-FOUR

“WE GOT A PLAN HERE, MORGAN?” asked Ben as he finally was able to buckle his seatbelts together, forming an “X” with the buckle itself on his chest. He knew he was going to need it. They might be in space, on the edges of Vassar-1’s planetary shield, but that didn’t mean they weren’t already feeling the effects of the planet’s gravity.

It was artificial, of course. Vassar-1 was small enough that its natural gravity was relatively weak. That had been corrected a long time ago by enormous gravity generators. They not only simulated Earth’s gravity all over the small world, they also exerted gravity outward, far into space, around the world.

It was, first and foremost, a defensive tactic. The gravity generators created distortion ripples that extended hundreds of thousands of kilometers into space. It was havoc for ships nearing the planetary shield, since they had to contend with more and more g’s while still in space and had to therefore approach the world relatively slowly. On the other hand, it made fold jumps anywhere near Vassar-1 impossible.

As a result, no attacking force could hope to surprise the world. They could only jump somewhere outside the gravity distortion and make a conventional approach. And if their ships were large, they’d have to approach slowly or risk rending their crew unconscious thanks to the g-forces associated with rapid slowing near the planet.

None of that seemed to be bothering Morgan as she fired up the thrusters on the *Lost*, yet Ben quickly understood what Morgan was doing. She had shoved the *Lost* forward and was weaving wildly in and out of the long line of ships waiting for passage through the main gates of Vassar-1’s

planetary shields. The ship's artificial gravity was struggling to compensate, but so too were the fighters following them.

"My plan?" Morgan asked. "I'll start with not dying. Now shut up and let me work."

The two AIC fighters had started from a dead stop, and were just now ramping up to full speed. They fired on the *Lost*. Ben was plenty scared, and not too proud to admit it, but couldn't deny how impressive Morgan's maneuvering was. The fighters didn't score a single hit, but those were just the cannons. If one of them broke out a missile, they were all screwed.

"If we get through the gate, we'll be okay," Morgan reassured him.

"They can close it," Ben pointed out.

"Not with that big sucker right in the middle of it," Morgan said.

Ben saw now what she meant. A huge cargo freighter was just beginning to transit the gate. It would take more than a minute to pass.

"What's to stop them from just shooting us down once we're through?" Ace asked.

"They wouldn't want to—shit." Morgan made the *Lost* take a sudden barrel roll. One of the AIC fighters chasing after them almost clipped their good wing. Instead, the shots grazed the bottom of the ship. Whoever was behind those sticks was a good pilot.

Francesca and Ada both yelled expletives as they were thrown around as the artificial gravity struggled to compensate.

"Really? Because I really want to shit. Or throw up!" Ace clearly wasn't handling things well. Again, he was ignored.

"They wouldn't shoot us down once we're in the atmosphere. There's too much risk of us crashing into the endless city below," explained Morgan.

"Unless they think we're a serious threat," added Ben.

"Yup, unless they think we're a great enough threat. Almost there, almost kind of to safety." Morgan was almost close enough to the tight line of frigates, freighters, trader ships, transport vessels, and personal-use ships that the fighters couldn't fire upon them. Not anymore, lest they risk hitting civilians.

"Ah, shit," Ace said. "We got a real problem."

"Spit it out, dipshit," Morgan said, a moment before a flashing light on her console confirmed what Ben suspected Ace was going to say next.

"Incoming missile."

Ben's heart sank. One of the fighters was bold enough—or stupid enough—to unload a missile this close to civilian ships.

Morgan didn't panic. Instead, she doubled down on her favorite move.

Some pilots came up with names for maneuvers they believed were their own creations, Ben knew. For Morgan, that was the double helix maneuver, or DNA roll. Basically it was rapid barrel rolls, while piloting the ship left and right to evade energy-seeking projectiles.

The gravitational forces produced from doing a double helix were intense this close to the planet. Everyone in the *Lost's* cockpit was pinned to their seats. Ben's only concern was not passing out.

Strike that. His first concern was *Morgan* not passing out.

The missile that the AIC pilot fired tried its best to keep up. Made to lock onto the energy signature of the ship, it chose the rear thrust exhaust. Problem was, they moved so fast during the double helix that the projectile struggled to keep up. Eventually it was overwhelmed and flew off course.

“Hold on!” Morgan said.

Ben was just barely avoiding unconsciousness, and had to assume the same of Morgan. Her words were slurred. But she managed to wrestle the *Lost* back under control, then flared the thrusters to come to a hard stop. The whole vessel shook.

Francesca threw up, and Ben just barely kept from doing the same. Tomas was gritting his teeth like he was trying to cut steel with his jaw.

The errant missile slammed into the side of a freighter ship. It was so big that it wasn't catastrophic, but someone would have to fool themselves to think the impact didn't cost some people their lives. It was clearly collateral damage the AIC fighter pilot was willing to live with.

Morgan was flying at full thrust now, moving recklessly fast, weaving in and out of the line of ships. Ben sensed she was pushing the *Lost* as fast as she possibly could, making everything inside vibrate. It felt like it was gonna shake apart.

The impact to the freighter seemed to affect the AIC fighters. The both started to fall back. Ben had to assume there were professional, and probably legal, repercussions. At some point, the risk-reward ratio for tagging an unregistered raider-class ship trying to illegally enter the planet's atmosphere began to tip in their favor, and the fighters backed off.

Ben exhaled loudly. He wasn't sure when he'd started holding his breath, but it had been a while.

When he looked over at Morgan, Ben saw that she was hyper-focused. When he looked back up at the viewscreen, he was glad she was. She'd come within feet of colliding with two different cruisers that were closing ranks.

Clearly the word was out that something very wrong was happening at the gate. The line of ships was beginning to shift chaotically.

Ben looked out the *Lost's* front viewing window and was stupefied. *How the hell is she weaving through all those ships without hitting a single one?* He could feel himself getting queasy with all the rapid movement. Left, right, up, down.

"You sure you got this?" asked Ace. He looked to be in worse shape than Ben. Both his hands were wrapped tightly around his seat's armrest. His face was white as a ghost.

"We're almost there," Morgan murmured, not breaking her concentration.

Up ahead, Ben could see the gate entrance. He wondered how the hell they were going to get past it, because the huge freighter that had been holding the gate open was backing out now and shifting sideways. Ben suspected that the ship was getting directed to block their path by the traffic controllers.

There was a fairly small opening in the Vassar-1 shields. It was held open by a hexagon-shaped mechanical structure, almost like a mini space station. That structure was lined with turrets. When ships reached that point, they had their vessels scanned for illicit goods or stowaways, questioned by the planetary guard, and then, depending on what they found or what a crew's answers were, they were either let in or told in no uncertain terms to turn and leave before they were blown away.

"Now what?" asked Ben as he looked at all the guns lining the Vassar-1 entrance. Thick iron gates slowly started to close, cutting off any entry.

"Now we get serious," answered Morgan as she tapped one of her screens. A schematic image of the *Lost's* thrust assembly appeared. At least, that's what Ben assumed it was. He'd seen something like it when he'd been hiding in the tinker room earlier.

"We probably should have done that sooner," Ben suggested.

Morgan mashed down on whatever portion of the schematic display she'd enhanced up on her screen.

"Maybe," she said. "You should hold on."

TWENTY-FIVE

IF ANYBODY on board had an inkling that Morgan wasn't what she seemed, the fact that she'd installed oversized AIC superthrusters on the *Lost* would remove all doubt.

It would also make them seriously question her sanity. The ship wasn't rated for them for a good reason. It was probably going to damage the ship's superstructure to the point that it would never leave orbit again.

But that was a problem to deal with once they were on the other side of the gate.

The superthrusters were stationed in between the main engine exhausts in the back of the ship. There were three of them, and together they would provide about a minute of added boost to the *Lost*, assuming it survived the strain that long. And if it didn't, well, they'd be dead in moments, so who would know?

Morgan's artificial eyes lined up the best path in through the closing planetary entrance doors, and she started the *Lost* into another barrel roll. Except, this time, she activated the superthrusters just as the ship started to spin.

The vomit express left the station.

The turrets that lined the planetary entrance opened fire. Spinning at ungodly speeds, some of the rounds hit the *Lost*, but others were deflected off by the pure centrifugal force.

Ben lost the contents of his stomach, which swirled in midair in the cockpit. As did Ace.

Morgan could hear, over the sound of large caliber bullets hitting their vessel and deflecting off, Tomas and Ada throwing up in the back, too.

Francesca had already passed out. The others began to pass out as well.

Morgan's artificial eyes, the things allowing her to manage such ridiculous maneuvers, sent signals into her brain and body over and over, preventing blood from pooling in her feet and legs and keeping her awake.

In spite of it all, she still came in and out of consciousness. When she was awake, she heard sirens and alarm bells, and saw everything in the cockpit bathed in red emergency lights. Then it'd all go black. Again, she'd awaken briefly to the sight of a vast city through the *Lost's* front viewing windows. Finally she fully regained consciousness, and immediately wished she hadn't.

"Wha...?" Ben's voice drifted over her shoulder. She could hear the others struggling as well.

The superthrusters had died, but the damage they'd done to the rear thruster assembly was catastrophic, or nearly so. Morgan struggled to tame the wiggling piloting stick.

"What happened?" Ben said again, finally finding his voice.

"Good news, bad news," Morgan replied. "Good news, we made it through the gate. Bad news, we took too many hits doing it."

"And that means?" Ace asked.

"I'm not gonna be able to land her," Morgan said. She could feel her face was covered in sweat. Sparks flew from instruments in the cockpit as things short-circuited. Smoke was billowing out from the back shared space, where Ben could hear Ada, Tomas and Francesca coughing.

"Can you at least crash-land her?" Ben asked.

Morgan could tell he hated the prospect of the reality of the words coming out of his own mouth. "I can try," she said. "Let me see if I can find water or something. Anything but a damn building!"

Ben glanced out the *Lost's* viewing windows, and Morgan knew exactly what he was seeing. There was nothing but buildings as far as the eye could see. It would've been quite impressive, Morgan suspected, his first glimpse of Vassar-1, if not for the mortal danger that came hand-in-hand with it.

"Over there!" Ben pointed towards what looked to be some kind of massive pool of water in the distance.

Morgan followed his line of sight. "Shit," she cursed under her breath. "I see it." She did her best to turn the *Lost* towards the distant body of water, even as she considered the tall buildings on one side of it. She aimed

to come in shallow from the other side. It would give them the best chance of making the water without ending up in the side of something solid.

Air currents began to buffet the ship. The *Lost* was designed for aerodynamic flight, in fact had been doing so ever since they'd first encountered the edges of the outward-facing gravity generators, but down here, this close to the building that comprised practically every square inch of the surface, the winds were unpredictable.

The stick started to grow heavy in her hand. Morgan doubted at this point that she had much if any control left over the flight surfaces.

“Everyone hang on!” she shouted. “Touching down in five, four...”

TWENTY-SIX

BEN WATCHED as the city of Vassar-1 got bigger and bigger the lower the *Lost* got. He grabbed his seatbelt buckles and tried to prepare his body for the big jolt to come.

“Three, two...”

So he didn’t accidentally bite it off, Ben stuck his tongue back away from his gritted teeth. His eyes were wide and alert. His heart threatened to burst out of his chest.

“One!” Morgan finished as the *Lost* dropped toward what seemed to be a long, shallow pool.

A moment before they hit, Ben spied a large, solemn-looking building rising out of the water at the opposite end from where they were landing. He recognized it instantly. Even a child of Earth knew what Jennifer Vassar’s tomb looked like.

This was the reflecting pool outside her tomb. One of the most sacred places on the planet. He wondered if there might not be some kind of security in place here, but he knew it was mostly ceremonial.

The *Lost* bounced off the surface of reflecting pool and briefly bounced up in the air before it descended again. This time it spun across the water as physics tried its best to slow it down.

And it would. The thick concrete lip of the pool would eventually stop it.

Ben’s, Morgan’s, and Ace’s heads and bodies whipped around violently as their ship crashed. Pieces of the cockpit flew all around it, cutting Ben’s face. The sound, the bottom of their ship scraping along the water and losing parts along the way, was so loud, a change from the silence of space.

And then it came to a sudden, appropriately jarring stop when the *Lost* hit the lip of the pool.

For a moment there was only silence. Ben's chest felt like someone had jumped up and down on it. He felt pain where the harness straps cut into his shoulders.

He slowly opened his eyes. He was hanging nearly upside down. He unbuckled himself, and immediately tumbled onto the grated metal floor of the *Lost's* cockpit. Blood dripped off his face as every inch of his body hurt.

There was no time to rest or feel pity for himself, though. Surely the authorities would be after them.

Okay, Ben. You're alive. You made it. Now get up.

Ben used one hand to brace himself and help himself push up off the cockpit floor. The second he stood up, he was extremely dizzy and stumbled around, almost falling, but he ran into one of the sides of the small space that held him up.

"Everyone okay? Sound off!" Ben said.

"Alive? Yeah. Okay...?" Ace unbuckled himself. Instinctively he reached for the nearest gun. It was a rifle. He used it like a crutch, helping himself get up out of his seat.

Ben looked over to Morgan. She was unconscious. As the pilot, she was closest to the front window, which had broken open during the crash landing, letting water slowly flow into the cockpit.

In the back of the cockpit, shielded better than the rest, Ada, Tomas, and Francesca were all still strapped into their jumpseats. Tomas and Ada sounded off, and indicated Francesca was okay as well.

Only able to see Morgan from behind, Ben figured she was just knocked out by the impact of the sudden stop. He stumbled his way over. Through the broken window he saw a crowd of Vassar-1 citizens gathering, looking inside the ship and at them, wondering what the hell was going on.

When Ben reached Morgan, he saw that she was in much worse shape than he'd initially thought. A sharp, jagged piece of the viewing window's glass had somehow made its way into her stomach.

"Ace," Ben snapped. "Get over here and help me."

"M-Morgan," Ace stammered when he joined Ben.

"Get her legs," Ben said as he slowly lifted her out of the pilot's seat, careful not to stress her stomach as he did so.

“Hear that?” Tomas asked, pointing up at the ceiling of the ship. “We gotta move.”

Ben took a deep breath as he heard the sirens of police and emergency vehicles coming their way. He nodded down at Morgan. “It’s not going to be that easy.”

“Oh, shit,” Tomas said, quickly moving to join them. Ada was right behind him.

“We gotta take it outta her,” Ace said, looking at the piece of glass in Morgan’s gut.

“Absolutely not!” Ada said. “That could be all that’s stopping her from bleeding out. She needs medical help that we can’t give her. We need to go to a hospital.”

Morgan coughed up blood. Her eyes opened.

Ben put a hand on her shoulder. “It’s okay, Morgan. We’re gonna get you some help. Okay? Just hang on.”

Morgan took a long, ragged breath. “Of course I’ll hang on,” she rasped out. “You think I’m gonna die for you assholes?” She tried to laugh, but it turned into a wince and a cough.

“Hell no, you won’t,” Ben said. He glanced at Ace and Tomas. “I’m gonna climb out, and then you can hand her to me. With this tin arm here, I should be able to carry her.”

“I don’t like moving her,” Ada reiterated.

Ben was about to explain why they didn’t have time for a debate when Morgan grabbed his shirt to get his attention. “What?”

“HUD, transfer secure file T4876 to Ben Saito. Authorization, Zulu, Echo, Four, Lima, X-Ray,” Morgan said.

“What’s this?” asked Ben as a holographic exclamation mark notified him that he’d gotten a file transfer.

“Safety,” Morgan wheezed. “Follow it.”

“Okay,” Ben agreed, even though he had no idea what Morgan was talking about. “HUD, open file.”

As soon as his HUD opened the file, things became a little clearer to him. It was a location on Vassar-1’s map. As Ben climbed out the broken viewing window of the *Lost* he instructed his HUD to set a waypoint for them to follow. The waypoint was the mark on the map that Morgan had transferred to him.

He jumped down into the shallow water. Ada, Tomas, and Ace managed to get Morgan over to the broken viewing window and pass her off to Ben. He cradled her with his metal arm as Tomas injected her with a stim shot. She still screamed out in pain. Ben wasn't a doctor, but this was bad.

Once everyone was out of the *Lost*, the group found themselves in a reflecting pool—which was a strange place to stand in—on a strange planet, in a strange city, with a now fairly large crowd of strangers staring at them.

The sirens were getting very close.

“We need to go now,” Tomas said as he helped Francesca out of the ship. She looked like she was in shock, staring at the blood smeared down Ben's front from Morgan's wound.

“Where?” Ada hissed. “Where the hell do we go?”

“Anywhere but here,” Ace said. He pointed his rifle up in the air and fired off a few rounds, dispersing the crowd. “Get the hell outta the way!”

“I know where we can go,” Ben said as he stared at the holographic path laid out before him by his HUD. “Follow me.”

TWENTY-SEVEN

ADA'S LEGS BURNED. How long had they been running? She made the mistake of looking behind her in one of Vassar-1's many alleyways. A bullet whizzed by her face, hitting a nearby concrete wall, sending pieces of it flying in every direction.

She fired her pistol behind her wildly, not wanting to actually hurt any of the Vassar-1 City Sentinel officers, as the megacity's police force was known. They were just doing their job and, in their defense, the *Lost* had just crashed into a monument to a beloved hero of the people.

Ada had agreed to take up the rear of their little group as they raced towards an unknown point on a map that Ben had somehow gotten from Morgan. The details were fuzzy, but nobody cared. It was their only hope at this point. Morgan wasn't going to last long without help, and the rest of them weren't going to last long without shelter.

In front of Ada were Ace, then Tomas, then Francesca, and leading the pack, Ben. Ace turned a corner up ahead and disappeared. Ada followed, barely avoiding getting shot again. As soon as she turned the corner as well, she was surprised to find herself pulled hard by her shirt and pinned against the wall.

Ace motioned for Ada to be quiet, one outstretched finger against his lips. He pointed in the direction the group was going. At the end of the alleyway, an AIC tank passed by.

They're bringing out tanks for us? I don't know if we should be flattered, terrified, or both. No, definitely just terrified.

Ada stared at the tank as it rumbled past. Then she realized that Ace was signaling something behind her. She turned as he motioned that someone

was tailing them.

Ace flipped his rifle around so the butt was at the ready and acted as a club. As soon as one of the Sentinels turned the corner, he bludgeoned him in the head.

That Sentinel went downing a heap, blood pouring out his nose. A second Sentinel, clearly having seen what happened to his buddy, took a more measured approach. He caught the butt of Ace's rifle and punched him in the gut.

Ace grunted and doubled over, but the Sentinel only had a moment to enjoy the victory before he saw Ada standing right behind Ace. She pistol-whipped the officer before he realized what was happening. He crumpled to the ground as Ace caught his breath.

"I had it!" Ace yelled in a whisper.

"You're welcome. Are there anymore?"

Ace reached over Ada and looked around the corner. Three or four shots flew past his face. "Yup. A couple."

"We need to keep moving," Ada hissed up to the front of the group. "We can't stay in this alley."

Ben seemed to get the message, and he started moving forward into the street again, holding Morgan's slumped form in his arms. The rest of them followed.

Ada kept her pistol trained as she hurried backwards. One Sentinel turned the corner into the alley, and she unloaded a few rounds into the nearby wall to keep him at bay.

When she emerged from the alleyway, Ada didn't expect to be exposed to a city in chaos. The tanks weren't for them, she realized. On the street, she had to push through a crowd of panicked citizens, some covered in dust, dirt, and blood. What were they running from? And what had their group stumbled into?

Ada's group went from alleyway to alleyway. The young Swedish Marine wondered where the hell they were going. She didn't question their direction, because she knew nothing about Vassar-1. She wished she did. Right now, there was no way to tell if they were running into a trap, a riot, or maybe—just maybe—a slim chance of safety.

Sentinel patrol vehicles flew overhead. "Citizens of Vassar-1," boomed a transmitted voice. "Please be calm. We have the situation under control. Please be calm. Stay in your homes."

“Do any of you know what the hell is going on?” Ada asked.

Ace turned to her. From the look in his eyes, like an intense reflection off a TV screen, she could see that he was watching something through his HUD.

“It looks like we had amazing timing. From what I can see, it’s terrorist attacks. All over the city,” he said. “You guys should tap into my HUD feed. This shit is...I can’t explain it, you need to see for yourself.”

Tomas knelt down in a firing position, his rifle trained on the entrance to the new alleyway. “I’ll take your word for it. Right now, we got more important shit to do than worry about these people’s problems.”

There was a callousness in his voice that Ada didn’t care for. Then again, he’d spent more time fighting the AIC than Ada had. A lot more time. There was plenty of history there. She had a feeling that Tomas wasn’t going to be the most sympathetic person when it came to the fate of the people of Vassar-1.

Ada caught up to Ben and the rest of the group. Morgan was alive in his arms, but did little more than moan. Blood seeped through the captain of the dearly departed *Lost*’s fingers. “What’s wrong?” she asked. “Why are we stopping?”

“It’s a dead end up ahead,” Ben said. His face was covered in sweat. One of his arms, the still human one, shook. Ada figured he must’ve been thankful in that moment to have a robotic one as well.

“That’s...not good. Is there any other way through?” she asked.

“How the hell am I supposed to know? I’m just following this damn map.”

“We can’t go out there in all that,” Ace said. “As much as I’d love to, we’d lose each other in the crowds.” Ace was actually turning down a chance to participate in chaos. Ada figured hell must’ve frozen over.

“Whatever we’re gonna do—” Tomas opened fire. The Sentinels were still after them. They must’ve figured the group was part of the terrorist attacks. “We better do it fast!”

Ben looked both ways down the alley. His vision focused on an old-school wooden door that led into a mystery building that could’ve been anything. With a single kick of his mechanical leg, he broke the door frame and tore the door off the hinges.

First through the door was Ben, with Morgan in his arms. Ada followed him inside. Then came Francesca, Ace, and Tomas, now bringing up the

rear.

Ada and the group were in a kitchen. They'd broken into a restaurant of some kind. The cooks and other kitchen staff cowered as the group made their way through out into the dining room.

Ben stood near the windows of the restaurant dining room that looked out on the street. Ada could tell he didn't know what to do. When she caught up with him, she understood why.

The streets of Vassar-1 were embroiled in pure chaos, panic, and confusion. People were running in every direction. In the distance, Ada saw an explosion. Multiple plumes of smoke rose up over the endless skyline. Sentinels tried to manage the crowds and fight back against an unseen enemy.

"All right, let's plan this out," said Ada, seeing that there was a need for someone to take the lead. "Why don't you put her down for a second, take a little rest?"

"I don't think she has a second to rest. We need to keep moving. Besides, it might do more harm to put her down and pick her back up again." Ben said.

"Fair enough. Let's make this quick, then. Can you send me the location we need to go to, and the map?" Ada was determined to ease Ben's load.

"That's all right, I can—"

"No! You can't!" Ada's adrenaline was on full blast. "You need to make sure Morgan's okay. I'll take point. I just need to know where to go."

TWENTY-EIGHT

“OKAY, I SENT IT OVER,” Ben said after he made the file transfer to Ada’s HUD.

Ada looked over the map quickly as Ace and Tomas took stock of how many rounds they had left. According to what she saw, they were only a few blocks away from their destination, something called New Dawn Bio Hacks.

It didn’t sound promising, but Ada figured beggars couldn’t be choosers. They couldn’t stay outside in this chaos. Unfortunately, they couldn’t get there through the alleyways. They had to go out into the streets, which was less than ideal.

“Two power packs for the rifles, about a half a mag in my pistol, and what do you have, Swede?” asked Ace, who was doing a quick ammo check.

“Whatever’s left in my sidearm and one more after that. That’s it,” answered Ada.

“Please remain calm,” boomed a loud, droning voice from above. “Do not panic. Everything is under control. Please stay in your homes.”

“I hope they don’t think that bullshit message is helping,” Ace said.

“We’re low on ammo,” Ada said, stating the obvious. She stood by the restaurant exit. “But we can get it done with what we have. Everyone, on me. Let’s save Morgan and find some shelter. Shall we?”

With her pistol out in front of her, ready and aiming forward, Ada led the way out of the restaurant and into the streets. She hugged the sides of the buildings, staying as far away from the mass of humanity in the middle

of the road as she could. They made it a block without incident before they were spotted.

“You! Freeze! You are under arrest by the authority of the Senate!” Ada turned to see three police hoverbikes closing on them from across the street. Each bike rider was armed with a military-grade rifle. They were heavily armored and definitely more than run-of-the-mill beat cops. They were out there to fight terrorists, not petty crime.

“What do we do?” asked Francesca, her voice trembling.

“We keep moving! They won’t fire through the crowd!” ordered Ada as she followed her own instructions.

But she was wrong. High-speed super-heated rounds cut through an unlucky section of the crowds in the street. It was a slaughter.

Ada ducked as bullets hit all around her. Tomas didn’t return fire, not wanting to kill innocents, and proving to Ada she’d been wrong in her earlier assessment of his distaste for the people of Vassar-1. Ace, on the other hand, had no such reservations, and fired indiscriminately back at the cops.

All at once, bullets started flying from atop the building Ada and the group were running past. She assumed terrorists had dug in up there and were opening up on the Sentinels on the hoverbikes.

Ada had started forward again when a massive explosion blew out all the windows in a storefront just in front of her.

Glass went flying out into the crowd of civilians, injuring many of them. But it was the fireball and blast wave accompanying the razor-sharp projectiles that did the most damage.

Ada got up with the help of Ace, ears ringing and bleeding. The street in front of the storefront was littered with the bodies of the dead and injured, which other civilians just stepped over and on.

Ace was trying to yell something to Ada. She stared at his face, but couldn’t hear a single word he was saying, so she tried to read his lips. As far as she could tell, he was saying something about almost being here or there. It was hard to tell. But then he turned from her and raised his rifle.

Ada saw three men and a woman step out from the fiery wreck of the storefront that had just blown up. They were all bald, dressed in ratty clothes with old surplus flak jackets on, outdated guns in their hands.

The Oblivion cult!

Ada felt no guilt, no hesitation, when she put a bullet in one cultist's head. She didn't feel that tinge of human morality and compassion as she watched a piece of the cultist's skull go flying out the back of his head. Nor did she feel sympathy as Ace lit them up with what she now saw not as violent psychosis, but purely justified, righteous glee.

As the last cultist fell in a pool of their own blood, Ace changed his magazine out. "Hey," he yelled, pointing over at a neon sign across the street, over a thick sliding metal door. "New Dawn Bio Hacks! That's where we need to go?"

"It sure as hell is," Ada said. "Let's get out of this damn meat grinder when we can."

She bum-rushed through the crowd, waving her gun around so they made space for her. The rest of the group followed close behind.

When they reached the steel-reinforced front door, it was locked. Ada didn't know why she didn't see that coming. Not willing to just give up, especially since they'd come so far, she went over to Morgan.

"Morgan?" Ada tried to get Morgan's attention. The poor woman was fading in and out of consciousness, and was in no shape to think, let alone answer a single question. "Morgan, we need your help. Is there a code or —?"

"I doubt she can even hear you," Ben pointed out.

"Well, we need to try something," Tomas said. He and Ace stood guard over the rest of the group, rifle-butting anyone who got too close.

Think, Ada. Think. How can we get this door open?

Ada looked around for anything that could help. That was when she saw the small camera right above the door. It was a floating orb that had a little green light next to a small lens.

"Open up!" Ada pounded on the door. "I know someone is in there! I can see the camera! Open up!" She kept pounding and pounding. At the very least, if there was someone inside who didn't want to comply, she could annoy the shit out of them as a sort of small victory.

"I can go around." Francesca managed to build up enough bravery to make an offer for the group. "I can go around and look for another entrance."

Ada appreciated Francesca's offer, but didn't want to put the teen at risk. Unlike everyone else, she wasn't trained to fight or to take care of herself. "No, stay here. We'll find another way."

As if on cue, a panel on the metal door slid open. Through it, Ada could see a pair of glowing orange eyes in darkness. Someone was there, she knew it!

“Who the hell are you, and what do you want?” asked a gruff woman’s voice.

“We need your help! This is a safe house, right? Or something like it?”

Apparently that was the wrong answer. From behind the neon sign, two small automated turrets activated, armed themselves, and aimed straight at the group.

“Or something like it,” the gruff woman’s voice answered. “Who sent you? How did you find this place? Talk and talk fast, or I’ll happily fill you with holes.”

Ben shoulder-butted Ada out of the way. He positioned his body in such a way that the person inside could clearly see Morgan’s face. “She did. And she’s gonna die unless you can help her.”

TWENTY-NINE

“IN CLOSING, esteemed members of the 223rd Senate, a picture is emerging of a real threat from the radical group Oblivion. A significant threat to Vassar-1 for now, but one that will soon spread to all the worlds of the Allied Colonies.” Heather Engano paused. “If it hasn’t already.”

Engano stepped back from the lectern and bowed.

She expected no reaction, and got none. She heard only the shuffling of chairs and the sound of aides coming and going from the chamber proper.

Engano stepped forward to the lectern. Sitting in the rows of seats in the Senate Circle, fifty senators from fifty worlds looked back at her. At least, a few of them did: the ones who could be bothered to be here and actually pay attention. “I’m sure many of you have questions.”

A senator from OV-34 raised her hand. It was a mining planet, not terribly hospitable to anyone other than workers and their families. Owned by the Orion Vander Corporation, it had been branded with a creative name.

“Madam Director. You’ve outlined a dire scenario, yet you’ve offered scant few details of what comes next. What do you and the Intelligence Agency plan to do about the Oblivion radicals?”

As the woman talked, Engano could see floating holographic information on her through her HUD. As an intelligence director, she had dirt on everyone. The senator’s name was Marwa Adilay. She was young. This was her first term. She’d been born in orbit around OV-34, and her family still lived there, but she now made Vassar-1 her home. Just another senator who worked to care about a home they never visited any longer. She had an on-again, off-again affair with two members of her staff. Her older

brother had died when she was a teen. Her younger brother was shaping up to be a fine juvenile delinquent. Nothing of much interest to Engano.

Engano was tempted to point out to Adilay that it wasn't the job of her agency to act on the information gathered. But these people could barely be bothered to understand even something that simple, and besides, Engano acted on the information she gathered all the time. She just wasn't about to tell these people that.

"I can't speak to the specific policies of the enforcement agencies, Senator Adilay, but my understanding is that the 'watch and contain but do not harass' policy remains in effect." She heard a few whispers, but she didn't blame them. The current administration of President Vallens was a joke as far as Engano was concerned. "On Vassar-1, the radicals aren't allowed to gather publicly or preach their beliefs in the streets."

"But surely we could do more."

Senator Balbins, who chaired one of the *three* joint defense committees that seemed to exist only to counteract the other two, stood. "If we take the offensive against them, we have reason to think that that would entice a war, much like the one on Earth. Which we have no desire to undertake, or make the great people of our Allied Colonies endure."

Engano kept her face passive, or hoped she did. Balbins would take the side of anyone who'd pay him enough. It was almost useless to gather information on him at this point.

"But what about when that doesn't work?" Adilay pressed. "For example, how about what happened to you, Madam Director, on your way to the District today? What's to stop that from happening again?"

I knew that question was coming. What took these useless people so long to ask? Of course they should be doing more. It was obvious to everyone. Everyone except Engano's only true boss, President Vallens, it seemed.

Engano knew the president was watching. She'd have to toe the line. It grated, but she'd been a politician far too long to stumble in this chamber. "Yes, I was attacked this morning. But we strongly believe that it was a targeted attack, meant to take me out as a high-priority target to make people, even important people like you esteemed senators, question whether or not anyone is safe. I assure you, we are safe. A couple of handfuls of extremists here in our city are not enough to raise much concern."

“But how did they know where you would be?” asked Senator Dal, an older man from the outer world of Yren.

“We’re still investigating. As you might imagine, since it happened recently, we haven’t had the time to pinpoint an answer yet.”

“With all due respect, Madam Director,” Dal said coldly. “If they can almost get to you, one of the most protected officials on this planet, how can you be so sure that the rest of us are safe from these radicals?”

You’re not, obviously.

“I can be sure of precious few things, Senator,” Engano said. “But I can promise you and the other senators that the enforcement agencies, in conjunction with the president’s office, are taking all the necessary steps and precautions to contain the threat. Now, if there is nothing else—”

“How about what happened on Magellan 5? Surely you’ve heard those reports?” asked Adilay.

Engano hesitated before she answered. It seemed the senator was drawing a line from those events to Oblivion. In fact, Engano’s office had as well, but that wasn’t common knowledge. On the one hand, she was glad that others were beginning to suspect a wider role for the Oblivion. On the other, it could lead to panic, and the president would trace that right back to her.

She really shouldn’t answer, but she was sick of sticking her head in the sand.

“It’s our working theory that a group of separatist extremists got control of decommissioned AIC ships that were lost and assumed destroyed during the outer colony revolts. They then used those vessels to attack that UEF mining colony on Magellan 5. Now, how they were able to attain the ships and the materials necessary to repair them is still unknown, but we’re working to nail that down.”

Engano could feel the energy in the room shifting. That was new information. She pushed ahead before she could be interrupted. “We’ve reached out to our opposing intelligence agency in the UEF and assured them that we had nothing to do with the attack, and we’ve also entered into an agreement to share any information we can dig up about the incident. Now, I think we’ve gotten a bit off-topic here, which is usually a sign for me to wrap things up. Thank you all for your questions, and—”

“And the *Perseverance*?” a deep voice boomed from the rear of the assembly. “What of her?”

THIRTY

AH, shit.

It was Senator Harrison LeFleur, father of the commander of the AIC *Perseverance* and longtime friend of the director's family. He represented the farming communities outside of Vassar-1.

"That's classified, Senator, and not pertinent to today's discussion. I understand that you might feel—"

"My daughter's dreadnought, crew, and several dozen fighters have all disappeared, along with two cruisers that were accompanying her," LeFleur said to anyone in the chamber who was listening.

As it turned out, many were. Suddenly the sound of chair and papers and aides whispering fell silent.

"No one has been able to contact them," LeFleur said, his voice lowered now, matching the hushed Senate Chamber. "No one has been able to get word to the families."

Engano knew exactly what the *Perseverance* had been after. To admit that the *Atlas*' payload, a weapon of unimaginable power, could be out there right now, in the hands of another party, would create a galaxy-wide panic. "As I said, Senator, it's still under investigation. I'm sorry, but that's all the information I can share at this moment. Now, if you'll excuse me. I need to get to work answering this body's many justified inquiries." Engano turned and walked towards the exit. Everyone would have been able to hear her high-heeled footsteps echo throughout the Senate Circle if not for the uproar in the usually civil assembly.

"Well, that went well, ma'am," Stacey said, voice dripping with sarcasm, as Engano stepped into the chamber foyer. "They do realize that

the point of these briefings is to ask questions about the issue at hand, not unrelated and unsubstantiated wild rumors about lost ships and unprovoked attacks, right?”

“My concern is that they *were* asking about the issue at hand,” Engano said.

“Ma’am?”

“We need to figure out what the hell is going on. I feel like there’s something coming, something bad.”

Stacey attempted to change the subject to their upcoming meeting schedule, but Engano tuned her out. All she could think about was what Agent Moreno had told her about the *Atlas*. If there were aliens out there—and the jury was still out on that—what would they want from humanity? What did they want with the *Atlas*’ hidden payload?

How did it connect to Magellan 5, if it did at all?

And why had the Oblivion decided to attack her in the heavily fortified markets, at midday, with such a small force? They must’ve known they’d lose.

The only thing Engano could compare the sinking feeling in her gut to was chess. It felt as if someone was setting her and the AIC up for a move that was five steps ahead. She needed to uncover those moves and end game before they found themselves in a checkmate.

Engano saw a notification in her HUD. It was an incoming video call from a source she had in the City Sentinel Force.

“Answer call,” ordered Engano.

“Madam Director?” A thirty-something Sentinel Officer appeared in a little box in Engano’s HUD.

“What is it, Lt. Harmonie?” asked Engano, fearing the words she was about to hear. She just knew it wasn’t going to be good news.

“A raider-class ship just broke through our planetary shield defenses.”

Damn. “Did they have a clearance code?”

“An outdated one.”

Engano pulled up short. Stacey stopped and looked back with a frown. Engano waved her away and turned to concentrate on what she was hearing.

Agent Moreno. The bitch really did it. How the hell did she expect me to set up an illegal transit more than two weeks ahead of schedule?

Moreno thought rules didn’t apply to her. But now she’d gone too far.

“And how did that happen?” Engano asked, beginning to walk again. She moved the video call to a corner of her HUD. Her convoy of cars was at the bottom of the very long and wide set of stairs that led up to the Senate Circle.

“We don’t know. They were able to shake a couple fighters. Then they somehow—” Harmonie shook his head. “I saw it and still can’t believe it, but they somehow slipped by the turrets.”

“I’m assuming you’re tracking the ship?”

“We are, ma’am.”

“Why do I feel like there’s a ‘but’ coming?” Engano stopped on the steps. From her vantage point, she could see much of the city. The Government District was built on a hill.

“But it crashed.”

“Where?”

“Near Vassar’s tomb. Actually, not just near it—”

“Survivable?” Engano interrupted.

“We think so.”

“Send a crew out immediately,” Engano said. “I want whoever is in that ship arrested. I’ll have a clean-up team there as well, to make sure this lapse in security isn’t public news.”

Dammit, Agent Moreno. That’s gonna be a public relations disaster. You better not die, so I can strangle you myself.

“Understood. Right away, ma’am. End call.” Lt. Harmonie went to work following Engano’s orders.

“What is it, ma’am?” asked Stacey as Engano hurried to get in the waiting hovercar.

“Nothing, Stacey. Just more shit to add to the growing pile. Let’s get out of here. I need a hot bath and a strong—”

Engano was interrupted by the unmistakable sound of an explosion.

THIRTY-ONE

IT WASN'T JUST a single explosion, she realized. It was quickly followed by another, and another.

“Are we under attack?” asked Stacey as she and Engano looked out over the city. From the look of it, they were very much under attack. They watched as more and more explosions were visible. Multiple towers of black smoke arose in different locations across the sections of Vassar-1 visible from their position.

“We’re too late,” murmured Engano.

“Too late for what?” Stacey was on the verge of tears as she watched what certainly were massive losses of life. She wasn’t military. She wasn’t even technically an agent. She was a civilian with a high clearance job. Emotionally, she wasn’t ready for an attack on such a large scale.

Engano’s HUD blew up. Notification after notification arrived. She had to turn off her notifications so she could think for a second. When she did, she came to one conclusion.

“It’s Oblivion. It must be.”

“But you just said—”

“I know what I said in that bullshit presentation,” Engano snapped. “And I’m telling you this is Oblivion.”

Engano felt helpless, and she hated that. She didn’t know what to do, or where to start. This was clearly a massive coordinated attack. Even though she had more resources at her fingertips than almost anyone else on the planet, at that moment she was left with as many questions as anyone else had.

But her answers would come soon enough. She needed to get herself into a position to respond quickly.

More vehicles pulled up at the bottom of the Senate Circle's stairs. Senators and their security teams started to pour out the building. All of them were too panicked or scared to pay the Director much mind or ask her any more questions. They just wanted to get to safety. Only one of them stopped.

"Director? What is this?" asked Senator LeFleur. "I just got three or four calls saying that multiple farms were attacked outside the city, too. We lost the bio-dome on one of them. Over twenty workers died, that we know of. Who's doing this?" He was calm but demanding.

"Terrorists, Senator."

LeFleur shook his head. "You bastards knew this was coming and you let it happen. All of you."

"And you, Senator," Engano responded coldly.

LeFleur shook his head like he hadn't heard her. "First you kill my family. Now, you kill everyone else's. Where does the incompetence end?"

A military transport flew in from up above, coming straight towards the Senate Circle stairs. Engano knew it was coming for her. In case of an attack, the standard procedure was to get her evacuated, along with the highest-ranking generals and military personnel, even though it was created with the UEF in mind, not crazed cultist terrorists.

"Where are you going? What are we supposed to do?" asked LeFleur.

The AIC military transport hovered about a foot above the stairs. Soldiers in the open doorways had to ward off and tell senators to stay back. They were there only for Engano and, by extension, Stacey.

"My advice would be to stay in the Government District. If you go out into those streets, you'll be targets. At least here there are military and guards. They'll keep you safe," advised Engano as Stacey was helped aboard the transport.

"You'll have to answer for this, you know," pointed out Senator LeFleur. "An intelligence failure like this, not seeing this coming. You'll have to answer to the Senate and the people."

"I know." Engano took the outstretched hand of one of the soldiers on board. He pulled her up into the transport. "But not right now. Right now, we have to stop this."

THIRTY-TWO

“SO...ARE you going to tell me what happened to her?” The orange-eyed proprietor of New Dawn Bio Hacks washed her hands in the sink of the business’ surgery room.

Ben sat in a corner, exhausted. Ada was in the room with him. Everyone else was out in the lobby area, upon the orange-eyed woman’s insistence.

“Our ship crashed, she was behind the piloting sticks, took a piece of glass in her stomach,” answered Ada.

“I know that. I just took the piece out of her. What I mean is, how did she end up with you lot?”

“We’re her friends,” responded Ben. “Not that I’m not grateful for what you did, saving her and all—”

“Hold off the parade, kid. We’re not out of the woods yet. She’s stable, for now.” The orange-eyed woman turned to Ada and Ben, leaned against the edge of the sink she’d just washed herself off on. She used a towel to dry her hands and forearms off.

“We’re grateful. But with all due respect, who the hell are you? And why did she want us to bring her to you?” Ben, now happy that Morgan wasn’t going to die in his arms, had a boatload of questions, and he was determined that this stranger was going to answer at least a few of them.

“Wait...are you telling me she didn’t tell you?” The woman looked surprised. Ben realized that it was just her irises that glowed orange. They were clearly artificial, much like Morgan’s.

Ada stood with her arms folded. “Didn’t tell us what?”

“Jeez, she didn’t. You poor bastards. Here.” The woman threw her towel to Ben. “Wipe yourself off, son, you’re covered in blood.”

She walked over to and stood above the sleeping Morgan, looking down at her. “Sorry, love, but it looks like your cover’s blown. And if it isn’t, I’m gonna blow it. Least that can be done for your ‘friends’ here who saved your ass.”

“Her cover?” Ben asked stupidly.

Yes, her cover. Of course.

Ben had known deep down that something about Morgan was different. The fact that a woman like her would get involved with a psycho like Ace and then become...whatever they were at that point...was confusing. It was unbelievable. Her connections had first warned her about the Oblivion double-cross on Earth, and then gotten them off the planet. A little too convenient, and now Ben knew why.

“I see. You must be the bright one of the bunch,” the woman said. “I’m LaFey, No first name, no last name, just LaFey. That’s all you need to know. And sleeping beauty here, her name is Clarissa Moreno. Agent Clarissa Moreno, with the AIC Intelligence Agency. In other words, she’s a spook.” The orange eyed woman—LaFey—took out an auto adhesive bandage and placed it over Morgan’s fused stomach wound. The edges of the bandage stuck to the surrounding skin on its own, creating a seal.

“I don’t believe it,” Ben stammered, but he did. He just couldn’t say it aloud.

“I don’t really care if you believe me, kid. It’s the truth.” LaFey reached into one of her shirt pockets. Out of it she produced a cigarette case. From it she took out a single cigarette, an incredibly rare item these days.

Ben stared down at Morgan, shaking his head. “This is crazy,” he whispered.

“All this time she’s been working for the AIC?” Ada asked. She, too, was looking down at Morgan.

“Yeah.” LaFey raised one index finger up. The top of it popped off, hanging on by a hinge. Out of the exposed top came a small flame, which she used to light her cigarette. “That’s what I just said.”

Ben stood up, threw the bloody towel on the floor. “Why?”

“That’s a great question. I have no idea. I haven’t heard from her for a couple of years now, so I’m kinda wondering the same thing. Honestly thought she was dead, not just ignoring my existence.” LaFey blew smoke in Morgan’s face.

Was she spying on us? Ben wondered. On me? And if so, for who? What does the AIC want with us?

“This stays between us,” said Ben. He looked over at Ada. “Understood? None of the others need to know.”

“Ooooo, secrets, secrets.” LaFey smiled with the cigarette hanging on her bottom lip.

“What are you talking about? We can’t keep this from them,” Ada said.

“Yes we can, and we will. Look, the last thing we need right now is for any of us not to trust each other, because we need to rely on each other to survive this fight. They find out she’s a spy, and any trust goes out the window. We know. That’s enough. And when she wakes up, we’ll make damn sure that she’s aware we know.”

Ben could tell that Ada thought it was a terrible idea, but she just crossed her arms. “I’m not sure about this.”

“I think it’s a terrible idea,” LaFey said as she took off her bloody apron. “Though I’m not one of your group of....what exactly are all of you to each other, again?”

Ben and Ada looked at each other.

“Not sure, huh?” LaFey asked. “I can smell the tension in the air. Anyway, you guys hungry? I’m damn near famished.”

THIRTY-THREE

“SO SHE’S GOING to be okay?” asked Ace. He slurped down some noodles as he sat around a round table in LaFey’s apartment above New Dawn Bio Hacks.

“Not making any promises, but she should be fine, handsome.” LaFey made a point to make eye contact with Ace. For all his talk and bravado, Ace actually shied away from her. Seeing that almost made Ben choke on his food as he tried to eat and laugh at the same time.

“What’s so funny?” Ace asked.

“Nothing, man, just....nothing. Finish your noodles.” Ben couldn’t help but smile. It wasn’t just Ace that amused him. He was happy that Morgan, or Clarissa, or whoever she would be to them going forward, would be okay. He was happy that for the moment, they had shelter from the madness outside. And he was happy that, for the first time since they’d met, his group, his crew, newer members included, weren’t running or fighting, even though he was aware that wouldn’t last.

“So what’s your deal?” asked Francesca. Her question was directed at LaFey.

“Me? Not much. I’m a biohacker, which means I implant all sorts of devices, prosthetics, and other shit into people for credits. You interested? I just got in some new fibrated legs. Sturdy as hell, and strong. They’ll make ya run like a damn gazelle.”

“No, I think she’s all right,” Ben answered for Francesca.

“Oh well.” LaFey ate another mouthful of noodles. “Her loss.”

Ada realized that only Tomas was missing the much-needed meal. “Shouldn’t someone go relieve Tomas? He’s been up there for a while.”

“I’ll go up and get him. I’m done anyway,” volunteered Ben. He got up, finished his water, then left the apartment.

There was a staircase that went up to the building’s roof, where Tomas was keeping an eye on the chaos outside, making sure no one was coming for them. As soon as he entered the stairwell, Ben could hear the sounds of fighting outside. He knew, even before he opened the door at the top, that things hadn’t calmed down.

Ben was smart enough to put together that LaFey wasn’t just a simple biohacker business owner. She too must’ve been AIC Intelligence. How else would she get tech like a camouflage canopy on her rooftop? Stretched out above the roof, the camouflage canopy used miniature cameras to record and project its surroundings, making the roof look much more mundane than it was.

In reality, there were all sorts of canisters and crates, full of God knew what. There was also a weapons rack with rifles, shotguns, and pistols. LaFey was ready for a fight. Question was, who was she preparing to fight?

The sounds of explosions and gunfire could still be heard all over the place, to say nothing of the screams. But Ben didn’t hear the crowds, the mass of humanity in the street outside anymore. And judging by the AIC ships screaming overhead, the military and the Sentinels must’ve been doing the hard work of trying to get things under control.

“How’s it going up here?” asked Ben as he walked over to Tomas, who was set up near the edge of the roof.

The former special ops operative surveyed the area using the scope on one of LaFey’s rifles. “Okay, I guess. This city? Not so much,” answered Tomas.

“Still bad?”

“Come take a look for yourself.”

Ben reached Tomas, who handed over his rifle. The first thing that he noticed was that the streets were mostly empty. That was, except for the dead who littered it, and the dying who squirmed and moaned. As much as he wanted to help, Ben knew that if they left their safe spot before things died down, they’d be killed as well. Either by the Sentinels, the AIC military, or the damn Oblivion cult terrorists.

“When was the last time you saw military, police, or terrorists coming down this street?” asked Ben as he continued surveying the surroundings through the rifle scope.

“There were some City Sentinels about a half an hour ago, but that’s about it. It’s pretty dead, at least here.”

“Have you heard anything through the HUD feeds?”

“Just a whole lot of chaos,” Tomas answered. “Hard to make anything of it all. But if you’re asking if it’s clear to move, no, not at all. Still way too hairy out here.”

“Got it. Go inside and get yourself something to eat. We need everyone as strong as possible. Who knows when the next fight’s coming.” Ben looked away from the scope for a moment.

“And Morgan? How’s she doing?” asked Tomas before making for the exit off the roof.

“She’s going to be okay.”

Tomas nodded, and then walked away.

Ben’s watch didn’t turn out to be as long as Tomas’. Within twenty minutes, a black gunship landed in the middle of the street not two hundred yards away from the New Dawn’s entrance.

Ben watched as three tall men emerged from the ship. Each had a shaven head. They wore all black, including their body armor and even the weapons they carried. When they turned their heads, he could see a red streak across each individual’s face. It looked like it was made of smeared blood.

Some poor soul stumbled out of one of the buildings a hundred yards down the street. They looked shell-shocked, wandering slowly towards the decidedly unfriendly-looking men in black.

It was a fatal mistake.

One of the bald men knelt down into a firing crouch. Ben watched as he squeezed off one perfectly-placed round, killing the dazed person with a head shot. It was a senseless murder, though Ben had seen plenty of that on the streets today. But something about this was way off.

Oblivion cultists were untrained radicals. Most of them, in their attacks, maybe shot guns once or twice in some haphazard training. But these three men in black, Ben knew they were different. Even the way they carried themselves was like soldiers.

Then another group of people appeared down the street, catching the attention of the bald commandos. There were children with this new group. Ben saw them holding hands with the adults.

Two of the commandos exchanged a glance that Ben read instantly. They weren't taking chances. They were going to take them out.

Ben felt his grip tighten. He couldn't stand there and watch children be killed, cover be damned.

His finger moved to the trigger of his rifle.

THIRTY-FOUR

TWO OF THE commandos knelt down into firing positions. The remaining one stood and calmly reached for another weapon slung around his shoulder. Ben, from his time in the military, recognized the weapon. It was a multi-launcher.

Multi-launcher were all-purpose tools of destruction. They could be used to fire all manner of grenades and charge rounds. Police used them for crowd control, shooting gas grenades and other suppressants. Soldiers used them to launch all manner of explosives. Construction workers used them for demolitions, getting shape charges on hard-to-reach portions of buildings.

Ben put three shots into the back of the standing commando. He crumpled, the multi-launcher falling to the ground beside him.

The other two commandos spun around, pointing their weapons up toward the rooftops.

Ben pulled his rifle clear, but not before one of the commandos spotted a glint of light off his scope. Ben saw an unnatural smile spread across the blood-smeared face. He dropped below the lip of the rooftop just as automatic fire started to pepper it.

Knowing that he needed to warn the others, Ben quickly withdrew from the edge of the roof as pieces of it flew apart under the barrage of gunfire. He kicked the door open and hurried down the stairs. In fact, he was in such a hurry he lost his footing and fell down the last five steps or so.

Ada poked her head around the corner near the door to the roof. “You okay?”

“We got company!” yelled Ben.

“What?” Ada was confused. “Who?”

“I dunno, but they aren’t here to talk.”

“We have more weapons on the roof. Shouldn’t we—?” Tomas was about to suggest that they go back upstairs to the roof and grab the guns LaFey had stored up there.

“We can’t go back up there,” Ben said. “They have a bead on it.”

A moment later, he and everyone else in the New Dawn heard a loud noise from up on the roof, accompanied by the whole building shaking. “Shit, they must’ve landed something up there.”

“You assholes aren’t being good guests,” LaFey cracked. She seemed surprisingly calm.

Ben ignored her. “Okay, Tomas, you stay up here, cover this door with Ace. Ada and I will go downstairs and deal with anyone trying to come through the front door.”

“What about me?” asked Francesca as the rest of the group armed themselves and got ready for a fight.

“Stay here with LaFey. Stay in cover, out of sight,” answered Ben.

“I wanna help!” Francesca insisted.

“I know, but not yet. Once we’re out of this, we’ll teach you how to shoot, but right now, in a fight, you’re a...you aren’t safe.” Ben turned to LaFey, who calmly ate her noodles. “Look after her, please?”

“Yeah, yeah, not a problem. She’ll be fine,” LaFey nonchalantly responded. Ben didn’t know if that worried him or if it was strangely reassuring. Maybe she knew something the rest of them didn’t.

Ben hurried downstairs to street level. Ada was already set up behind the counter, gun trained on the entrance. Ben quickly looked around, making sure there wasn’t a back door or a window or any other potential point of entry for the enemy. He saw none.

“I hope that LaFey bitch has something up her sleeve,” Ada hissed. “Because where one of these assholes is, more of them are sure to follow.”

“They weren’t like normal Oblivion,” Ben said. “They were trained. Competent.”

“Great,” Ada said. “Just great. How about telling me some good news?”

Before Ben could reply, the main doorway erupted with the sound of automatic gunfire.

LAFEY OPENED UP HER HUD. Her business had its own built-in defenses, and the first was the most obvious: the guns above the front door.

LaFey shoved another mouthful of noodles in her mouth while she waited, until she saw the commandos clearly in her front door cameras. Once a couple of bald heads showed themselves, she started the fun.

“Fire,” ordered LaFey. The two commandos were torn to pieces by the automated turrets.

The problem was that as effective as they were, they had limited ammo. After downing the two men, they were out. And unfortunately, quite a few more had arrived since Ben had shot one of them.

“Come on over here, kid,” instructed LaFey. She’d gotten up and walked over to the food dispenser. It was old, and there was a depressing array of ancient leftovers and condiments on top of it. She pulled it open, then said, “Come on, get in.”

“I’m not getting in a—” Francesca started to protest until she reached LaFey and saw what was inside. The main dispenser rack slid forward to reveal a dimly-lit opening that clearly went through the back wall of the apartment. “Is that—”

“It’s our ticket out of here. Now get in and wait for the rest of us.”

THIRTY-FIVE

ACE STOOD against the wall on one side of the stairwell leading up to the roof. Tomas was opposite him. Both waited and listened as commandos from the roof tried to bash their way in.

“So that’s bad news,” Tomas offered.

“I don’t think they’re falling for the camouflage canopy,” Ace agreed.

“We have to get them off that damn roof.”

One heavy blow after another echoed throughout LaFey’s apartment.

“I got a little something for them,” Ace said. He reached into his pocket and pulled out something no bigger than a pistol recharge pack.

“What the hell is that?” Tomas asked.

Ace just smiled and held it up. “Battery,” he said. “A little gift from one of the police robots on Sanctuary Station-33.”

“What good does that do us?”

Ace smiled. “Highly combustible,” he said, as he started to jury-rig a homemade grenade.

Tomas smiled. “I guess you aren’t all bad.”

“I have my moments.”

Ace tensed as he heard something smash against the door to the roof. “Down!” he shouted as he turned out of the hallway and around the corner. Tomas had just done the same when the door, smashed and mangled, was blown off the frame and bounced down the stairs, landing in a pile of scrap at their foot.

Ace nodded at Tomas. They heard the commandos whispering to each other as they slowly descended the stairs.

Tomas blindly fired a couple of rounds around the corner as Ace pulled the adhesive off the outside of his improvised explosive and tossed it up the hill.

There was a panicked shout a moment before the homemade bomb smacked against the top step and exploded.

Truth be told, Ace didn't know how combustible the battery charge would be. It was so violent that he was thrown off his feet. He struggled to regain his balance, and felt blood coming from his ears. Tomas was screaming something, but Ace couldn't hear him.

The explosion had sent one of the commandos flying down the stairs. He was clearly dead, but Ace shot him in the head anyway.

Then he turned the corner and unloaded up the stairwell. After a moment, Tomas joined him.

Ace wasn't sure what he was shooting. Smoke and debris filled the stairwell. There might have been a couple of mangled corpses up there, but it was hard to tell.

But there were more up on the roof. At least two, and possibly more. Ace shot one, and the others fell back.

"Come on!" Ace screamed.

Tomas shouted something back and reached out to grab his shoulder, but Ace shrugged him off. He was going to kill these commando cowboys if it was the last thing he did.

He was halfway up the smashed stairs, still trying to figure out just how to actually pick his way up to the roof, when movement up above caught his attention once again. He froze, but it wasn't another commando at the doorway. A metal frame floated in and out of his vision. Something big was just beyond the opening, floating in the air.

He was seeing the uppermost frame of a gunship, Ace realized. It was close, too. Very close.

Something on top of the gunship flashed brightly.

Tomas grabbed him again, and this time succeeded in spinning Ace around.

Ace still couldn't hear very well. Tomas was screaming; that much was sure. The muscles in his neck were popping out. But Ace could only hear dull static.

But he could read his lips well enough.

“Missile!” Tomas screamed as he jerked Ace off his feet a moment before what was left of the stairwell exploded.

The blast wave and pieces of concrete combined to throw both Ace and Tomas out of the stairwell and halfway across the room below it.

Ace’s last thought before he blacked out was how pissed he was that now he wouldn’t get to kill those damn commandos on the roof. The gunship had ruined it for everyone.

LAFEY SNATCHED up Ace and Tomas and threw the two soldiers onto her, one on each shoulder, and made her way to the food dispenser. Powered by her self-installed augments, LaFey could easily manhandle the two larger men without breaking a sweat.

She opened the dispenser, pulled out the rack to reveal the opening into the wall beyond, and unceremoniously dropped them in. She shouted out for Francesca to grab them, then slammed the door shut again.

“Two to go,” she said under her breath.

THIRTY-SIX

“CONCENTRATE FIRE ON THE ENTRANCE,” Ben said. “We need to make sure they don’t get in. Make it too costly to keep trying.”

Ada fought the temptation to tell Ben that she had more hand-to-hand tactical training from boot camp than he’d gotten in his whole career as a fleet officer. Instead, she gritted her teeth and kept her rifle aimed at the entrance. Always better to humor officers, after all.

Sparks flew from the inside of the front door.

“They’re cutting through,” she said. “Probably with a plasma torch.”

Ben wiped the sweat from his forehead. Ada was worried about him. He looked like he might pass out from the heat and exertion.

“Stay centered and concentrate,” Ada said. “Squeeze off good shots. We don’t need to waste ammo.”

Ben scowled. “I know.”

A thick cloud of smoke blew down the hall, accompanied by a loud clang, as the center of the metal door fell to the floor. Ada braced for commandos to emerge from the smoke, but instead, a single flash grenade slid across the floor.

“Cover your eyes!” yelled Ada as she turned her head away, a split second before the flash grenade went off. Immediately her ears rang, and she felt the concussive blast in her chest. But her eyes were spared.

Despite not being able to hear, she once again took her position, rifle pointed at the front door.

Again, the commandos didn’t come. Instead a rain grenade was tossed in.

Rain grenades were given that nickname because of how they worked. First a small charge would go off, sending another charge up into the air. Either the secondary charge reached a preordained height or hit a ceiling, whichever case it might've been; that one then blew up, sending razor-sharp shards of shrapnel in all directions.

Ada didn't hesitate. She ran over towards Ben, who was clearly feeling the effects of the flash grenade. Ada was sure he didn't see the rain grenade.

Tackling and shielding Ben at the same time, Ada pinned him against a wall, using her own body to cover his. She wrapped his mechanical arm over her back and around her head to prevent a potentially fatal injury; then she yanked his leg over hers and hoped for the best.

Much of the razor-sharp shrapnel hit Ben's artificial limbs, but at least some dug into Ada's side. Pain blossomed there, but there wasn't time to recover. She twisted back over onto her knees, gritting her teeth against the pain, and raised her rifle at the door once again.

Two strategically-used grenades, and she hoped there wasn't a third. At this point, she'd prefer that the commandos come storming in.

She got her wish.

A couple of pairs of glowing red circles appeared in the smoke. Ada opened fire as she tried to reach cover. One of the pairs of glowing red eyes went down, only to be replaced with two more and a whole lot of returned gunfire. Super-heated high-velocity bullets flew from the hallway near the entrance.

Ada dove to the ground, desperately trying to get around the corner and find some cover. She was pinned. The pain from the shrapnel in her side was like a fire in her chest.

She rolled over, and figured she was dead.

Then she heard someone to her left scream, and spun around to see Ben running wildly at the doorway.

"Ben!" Ada screamed, but he was around the corner and charging forward into the smoke, firing his rifle, before she could react.

At first Ada could only hear muffled gunfire. Then she heard the sound of something heavy hitting the floor, and the gunshots stopped.

Ada quietly crawled forward, dragging herself to the edge of the hallway. She peeked around the corner, looking for any sign of Ben.

Then she saw him on the floor. He must've been knocked out for a second, because he was just coming to, trying to gain his bearings. Two

bald commandos in full-body armor stood over him, with their guns pointed at his face.

Ben raised his hands. They were empty. His rifle was gone.

Ada raised her own weapon, about to fire, when a half-dozen more commandos approached through the smoke. They all stood over Ben, looking down with glowing red eyes, but none of them pointed a weapon at him. Instead, the first two lowered their weapons as well. Then they simply stepped over Ben like he was just another dead body in the street.

Ada pulled back around the corner to avoid being seen and almost ran smack into LaFey, who'd slipped up behind her.

"Shit," she mouthed. "You almost gave me a heart attack."

"You're bleeding," LaFey said, pointing at Ada's side.

"I'm fine."

LaFey put her hand on Ada's shoulder, and even that light pressure made her grimace.

"It's okay," LaFey said. "I got him. Go upstairs into the apartment. The food dispenser's already open. Climb in. The others are already in there. It's safe."

Ada stared at her. "What are you—"

"It's a safe passageway. You'll see."

Ada motioned behind her to the hallway. "There's no way you can take them all. I'll help y—"

"I'll be fine. Go! Now!" With strength that caught Ada off guard, LaFey pulled her away from the corner and upward onto her feet. Then she winked at Ada.

Ada staggered to keep her feet. As much as she hated to admit it, LaFey was right. She was useless, so she did as she was told. She didn't like it, but she didn't see any other choice.

Plus, part of her felt like the quirky shop owner was more than capable of defending herself.

GUNFIRE EXPLODED ALL AROUND BEN.

For a moment, he thought the commandos must have come to their senses and decided to shoot him.

He rolled over, desperately looking around for his rifle in the smoke of the destroyed hallway. Dirt and rock were everywhere.

One of the commandos grunted and collapsed right next to him.

Then another, and another. Ben heard more gunshots, mixed in with screams and even begging.

And then the shooting simply stopped.

Through the smoke and his own concussion, he couldn't see what went down. He only saw the last person standing: a calm LaFey, covered in blood.

"How about we get the hell outta here, kid?" she asked Ben, holding out her hand.

"How did you..." Ben stared at the bodies all around him. "Never mind."

He got to his feet, still woozy, and started to head out the front door, assuming the others were out there already.

"Wrong way," LaFey said.

Confused, Ben followed her upstairs to her apartment. "Uh..."

"Ben!" Ada said. She was at the door of the food dispenser.

Ben frowned. "What the hell is going on?"

Ada held open the door. Beyond the main racks of the dispenser was a hidden door. Beyond that, Ben saw that there was a dimly-lit opening that went into the wall of the apartment. "Everyone's down there?"

"Except Morgan," Ada said.

"Clarissa," LaFey corrected. "And that bitch can't be moved. Not in her state. She's going to be lucky if she lives at all."

"You said—"

"I know what I said, and this is what I'm saying now. She can't be moved." LaFey shook his head. "She's an agent. She'll be fine. We can't stay here. Besides, she's not who they're after."

Ben narrowed his eyes. "Who are they after?"

LaFey watched Ben's face closely. "I have an idea."

Ben didn't like that one bit.

"Where's this going to take us, LaFey?" Ada asked, hooking a thumb back at the opening behind her.

"Somewhere safe. Now get in."

Ben nodded at Ada and stepped in. "I'm starting to understand why you were so much calmer than the rest of us, LaFey."

“You’re welcome,” she said, before she stepped in and closed the door behind them.

THIRTY-SEVEN

A BLACK VEHICLE landed outside of the New Dawn Bio Hacks. It was smaller, but better-armored and armed, than the others belonging to the commandos that had besieged the building. Inside were two people, both far more dangerous than the commandos they had trained.

First out of the ship was a very tall, skinny, but wiry strong man named Ducar. He was in command of the elite Oblivion warriors known as heralds. Unlike his subordinates, he didn't have a shaved head. Quite the opposite: he had long black hair that receded into a widow's peak.

After Ducar, out the other side of the black vehicle, came a short, powerfully-built woman. Her name was Vesta. The sides of her head were shaved, and a scar ran from the crown of her head to the middle of her left cheek. A smear of blood across her eyes and the bridge of her nose stood in stark contrast to Ducar, who only had a small tattoo of a bloody hand on his neck.

"Did you acquire the target?" Ducar asked before the herald who came up to him could even say a word.

"Well, no. The thing is, they were more d—"

Ducar quickly unholstered his large-caliber pistol and blew the herald's head off before he could even finish his sentence.

"Where is he?" Vesta grabbed one of the heralds by the throat. She squeezed hard enough to hear a popping noise.

"They're inside somewhere," explained another herald, who talked as he watched Vesta squeeze the life out of his fellow warrior. "We believe there's a hidden room or trap door or something. Right now our men are tearing the place apart looking for them."

“What are we waiting for, then?” asked Vesta as she dropped the herald. “Let’s go get our saviors’ prize and kill the rest.”

Ducar, armed with his pistol, entered the shop’s destroyed front hall.

The first thing Ducar noticed was the dead bodies. Their target’s group was efficient fighters, judging by all the deceased heralds. No matter. These were expendable people, just meat and bone trained to be thrown into the grinder.

Vesta knelt down next to the spot on the floor where Ben had fallen earlier. She ran her fingers across it, sniffed the air.

“What do you have?” asked Ducar as he made sure to check every wall, behind every piece of furniture. His artificial eyes scanned every surface, looking for any kind of hidden structures.

“Saito was here. I can smell him.”

“You remember how he smells?”

“I remember everything,” Vesta stood up. “Looks like he fell here. No blood, so he doesn’t look to be injured. There was no way they could’ve gone out the front door. So—?”

“They went upstairs.” Ducar stood at the bottom of the stairs that led to LaFey’s apartment. He aimed his pistol up there, looking for any sign of movement. Having seen nothing, he started to slowly ascend them. Vesta followed.

Vesta slowly walked around the bed in the small surgical suite on the second floor. “Must’ve been in a hurry.”

“What do you mean?” asked Ducar from the other room. He investigated every nook and cranny for any sign of a secret room or hiding place. With the barrel of his pistol, he moved around the remnants of the group’s dinner still on the kitchen table.

“They left one of their friends behind. From the looks of her, she just had surgery. Probably wasn’t fit to move.” Vesta lifted up the sheet covering the woman and saw a clear flesh-fuse line on her stomach.

“Take her.”

Ducar opened the food dispenser. The racks were empty. He saw nothing but a collection of crusty leftovers and condiments on top of it. He closed it.

He sighed. “They’re gone. We can use her to lure them out.”

“If we move her, who knows how much damage that might do to her?” Vesta pointed out.

“As long as she doesn’t die, that’s all that matters. Have the heralds bring up a stretcher, if that would ease your mind. And hurry. We have a lot of work to do before they arrive.”

THIRTY-EIGHT

SAITO SAT in his chair on the UEF *Ulysses* command deck, holding the Polaroid. The image of the dead AIC soldier was gone, replaced once more by the image of his family at the boardwalk.

He was a commander at this point, serving under Captain Royce. The picture had once served as a reminder of what he dreamed of returning home to. Now, after reliving the original memory, it only depressed him, especially since he knew what was about to happen.

“Now this is more like what we came for.” The Pale Man stood in front of the screens of the viewing window. Like the *Atlas*, the viewing window in the UEF *Ulysses*, also a dreadnought, was made up of dozens of video screens displaying the pictures from as many cameras on the ship’s exterior.

In the viewing window screen, the Pale Man and Saito both saw the surface of Aeruta far below. It was the closest AIC planet to UEF space, and needed to be obliterated. That way the Marines could move in, finish off any stragglers, and set up a new spacefield to launch UEF ships further into their enemies’ territories.

“Commander, notify flight command to deploy all fighters,” ordered Royce from her command chair.

“Yes, ma’am.” Late thirty-something Saito folded up and put away his Polaroid. He then tapped into his HUD. “Flight Command, this is Commander Saito. Deploy all fighters. I repeat, deploy all fighters.”

The Pale Man watched in fascination as a swarm of UEF fighters flew out of the dreadnought, five or six at a time. They flew around and under the UEF *Ulysses*, waiting for their next orders.

“Pay close attention, Saito,” instructed Royce. It was the veteran captain’s last flight. Next deployment, Saito would be taking the helm.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“What does she mean, pay close attention? Why?” asked the Pale Man. He turned away from the screens towards Saito as UEF fighter ships flew around on said screens behind him.

“I would command the *Ulysses* after this mission,” Saito said. “She wanted me to see what it took to be a captain. She wanted to make sure I knew that every decision a captain made in situations like this came at a price. The cost was human lives. She’s not... something’s wrong with her.”

“Okay, take us out of orbit, into the planet’s atmosphere. Time to start our bombing run. Commander, give the go-ahead to the fighters to engage. Comms silent for entry.”

Saito and the other crew on the *Ulysses*’ command deck stayed nervously silent as the dreadnought shook from its violent entry into Aeruta’s atmosphere. It wasn’t that which gave them pause or raised their heart rates, though. Ships were rarely destroyed on entry anymore. No, they were nervous about what would be waiting for them soon as they were inside.

“Redirect power to the shields on the bottom of the ship. Descend twenty thousand feet.” Royce barked orders as the *Ulysses* was immediately met with anti-air fire from turrets below on Aeruta’s surface. There were countless streaks of orange flying up past the dreadnought or hitting the shields. They were still too far up for flak guns or shredders.

It was Saito’s job to relay the captain’s orders, make sure they were fulfilled, and do more of the micro-managing of battle. For example, he instructed the squadrons of fighter ships to start their runs first.

The Pale Man watched intently as the UEF fighter ships ducked down through the clouds towards the planet’s surface. Royce’s dreadnought soon followed.

“Commander, update on the fighters’ strafing runs?” Royce asked.

“Green Leader, this is the command deck. Respond. Green Leader, this is command deck, please respond.” Saito tried to reach one of the fighter squadron’s leaders. He got nothing but static.

It wasn’t until the *Ulysses* descended all the way through the clouds that he and the rest of the crew saw what they were really in for. There were explosions in the sky everywhere. Flak cannon rounds exploded nearby,

peppering the dreadnought's shields. Fighters flew in every direction. Several were hit, on fire, barreling down towards the planet's surface. Fire of all sorts erupted up from the ground.

"So much chaos," the Pale Man said. "How do you manage to operate in all of this? With all these distractions?"

"You just do. Adrenaline, I guess, maybe. I don't know how to describe it," answered Saito.

"Starting bombing run," said Royce, undaunted.

The *Ulysses* started its bombing run, armed with hundreds of thousands of explosives. As soon as they flew over the beginning of the target area, they started to fall.

As bombs dropped, quickly overwhelming Aeruta's city shields and leveling the structures it uncovered, the *Ulysses* did not relent. The cannons that lined both sides and the bottom of the dreadnought fired on the planet's surface. The result of all of this was just an inferno below that grew a little bigger with each explosion.

"Hell on Earth," Saito murmured. He had forgotten just how complete the devastation was.

"I'll be right back, Mr. Saito. I'd like to see what the rest of the crew is up to right now." The Pale Man literally melted into the floor of the command deck.

Saito knew what was coming. In some sick, twisted way, he didn't want the Pale Man to go. He didn't want to face this again.

"Commander, do you see?" asked Royce. The look on her face was impossible to read. Weariness, maybe. Sadness. Determination. It was clear to Saito that she'd seen and been through enough.

"See what?" he managed. He knew what was going to happen, but he couldn't will his body to act.

"How heavy the crown is," Royce said.

She took out her pistol, put it in her mouth, and pulled the trigger.

THIRTY-NINE

SAITO STOOD THERE, slack-jawed, staring at her crumpled body as blood pooled under what was left of her head.

Other members of the crew, those not seeing to their downed captain, talked to Saito. They tried to tell him that he was in charge now. They were in the middle of an engagement. They asked what his orders were. He couldn't hear them, and even if he could, he had nothing for them. He wasn't ready.

"Mr. Saito." Saito did hear the Pale Man's voice behind him. With his signature wide smile, the alien put both of his hands on Saito's head. "Got what we need. Time to fast forward, friend."

Saito and the Pale Man quickly cycled through a few memories. All they saw were brief glimpses. In one, Saito saw himself making passionate love to his wife. He caught her scent in the rapidly passing recollection.

One memory saw Saito on the command deck of his own ship. His son Ben was an adult, a lieutenant commander under him, yelling at him. It was on the UEF *Valiant*.

Ben was beside himself. "We can't just leave them behind!"

"Lock the doors and turn off the life support. Then decouple the latches on engine room one, Lieutenant Commander," ordered Saito. His voice was cold, his orders even colder.

"I can't...I cannot follow that order, sir."

Saito sighed. "Lieutenant Commander, that was an order."

"I know. And I respectfully refuse it."

Saito leaned in close to his son and second. "If you don't do as I say, Ben, you will be thrown in the brig."

“Better that than sentence good men to de—”

“Marines! Please relieve the lieutenant commander of his duties and take him down to the brig.”

“We need to return to this, Mr. Saito,” the Pale Man said. “Interesting, very interesting indeed. For now, though, we have work to do.”

“You should be honored, old friend,” said Admiral Chevenko. Saito found himself on an open-air elevator, only a grated metal wall separating the people inside from a fatal fall.

On the elevator were Saito, Admiral Chevenko, Lieutenant Commander Rollins, two Marines, and the Pale Man. They were at the shipyards in Annapolis, a secretive build site called Site C. Unlike other sites on the yards, it was closed off, the air space above it strictly restricted. Scramblers prevented space-bound drones or vessels from seeing it from orbit. Here, the UEF built their most secretive projects.

“I am, sir. This is...well, I don’t have the words to describe what an honor this is,” replied Saito. He was in his best dress uniform, complete with stars, bars and metals.

“I know how to describe it. Well-earned. You deserve this, especially after all you’ve given to the UEF, to the military, and to your planet. Your last command, you’re awarded the chance to end the war. I can’t think of anyone more suited for it.” Admiral Chevenko smiled, grabbed his old friend and subordinate by his shoulder, and playfully shook him.

“Is this it? Did we stop at the right memory?” asked the Pale Man.

“Depends on what you’re looking for. Because, come to think of it, you haven’t told me yet.”

“For the *Atlas*. We came for your ship,” answered the Pale Man.

“Why? What do you want with the *Atlas*?” Saito feared the Pale Man’s answer. He knew there was no way anything positive would come from this.

Sure enough, he was right.

“We need to see it clearly so we can replicate it. We want to see its inner workings, see how it’s operated, see how you command it. We wanted to be better at being you and your crew.”

Saito’s heart rate rose. He started to sweat. Suddenly his mouth felt really dry. “Why?” It was hard to even get the words out.

“So we can complete your mission. Bring peace between your UEF and AIC by introducing your once enemies to the Abyss. And honor you by

wearing your face as we do it.”

Though Saito wanted to throw up, his memory self wouldn't allow him to. He tried to do everything he could to wake up. He didn't want to give the Pale Man what he wanted. But no matter what he did, from biting himself to banging his head against the walls of the elevator, nothing worked. The others in the elevator didn't even notice his antics.

“It's no use, Mr. Saito. Just cooperate. It'll make everything easier.”

“I'm not giving you anything else!” Saito was determined, but he was fighting a losing battle.

The elevator reached the top. The door slid open, and there it was: the UEF *Atlas*. Mechanics and engineers were putting on the final touches, as it was only a week away from launch.

Seeing it there, one more time, Saito couldn't help but admire the *Atlas*. That was before panic set back in, because he knew what came next and what that could lead to.

“Ready to take a look inside?” Admiral Chevenko asked, leading the way into the nearly-finished portion of the ship. “I want to show you what's so special about this ship. It's what will win this war for us.” He lowered his voice. “One way or the other.”

The Pale Man smiled as the group stepped off the lift. He looked at Saito with a twinkle in his eye. “I can hardly wait.”

EPILOGUE

CITY SENTINEL OFFICER Lt. Ian Harmonie walked up to the entrance to the engineering marvel that was the space elevator connecting the surface of Vassar-1 to the gate in the planetary shield far above. He was about to start his second shift of the day.

There were crazy reports coming in from everywhere. Ian wasn't a fan of pulling two shifts back-to-back, especially after what had happened in his first shift, but days like this made him glad he wasn't a beat cop anymore. He'd probably get pulled into God knew what. The station duty might be boring, but it was safe. Ian liked safe.

"Please take a seat and pull down the restraints. Remember, these restraints are for your own safety." A stale automated voice gave out instructions for anyone inside the elevator. In fact, the elevator was actually a climber car that ran the length of the tether cable, which extended well into space in geostationary orbit.

This afternoon, it was just Ian and a delivery boy.

Ian looked around. This part always made him nervous. Everything was rusty and old, underserviced. The space elevator and the station it was attached to had been around for as long as the city itself. It was considered one of the wonders of the modern colonies.

"Prepare for your ascension. Locking doors and restraints." Ian heard the loud click of his restraints locking, and the door as well. Lights that lined the top of the elevator's ceiling turned on and turned yellow. "Take off from the platform in five, four, three—"

Ian made eye contact with the teenage delivery driver across from him, who looked very nervous. It must've been his first time.

“Relax, kid,” Ian reassured him. “It’ll be over before you know it.”

“Two, one, lift off,” informed the automated voice in the elevator. With a bit of a jarring jolt up, the elevator quickly sped up towards the planetary shield station.

When he’d first started, Ian couldn’t look out the elevator windows on the way up. It had made him nauseous, but not anymore. Now it was his favorite part.

Ian watched as the vast, seemingly endless city of Vassar-1 got smaller and smaller. He looked at the ships, some Sentinel, some AIC military, and others civilian transports, flying by. All were careful to keep their distance as per the laws. A smile was fought back as they passed through the clouds. The delivery kid threw up in one of the vomit bags attached to the seat.

There was gravity and air pumped through the climber, and thanks to the artificial power assist, the long ascent was vastly faster than when it was first constructed. It would only take eight minutes.

Ian used the time to finish his formal report on the incident that had happened only a few short hours ago during his first shift. When he’d gone planetside, he’d first had to explain to the Sentinel Chief how and why they’d let a ship through the planet’s defenses. Then he had to do the same thing with the Defense Minister, the Director of Intelligence, and the governor of the district it landed in. To make matter worse, it looked like the ship was somehow related to the unrest that had broken out planetside.

Ian tried to put all of that out of his mind as the climber attached and coupled with the station. The doors opened and he hurried out, eager to get away from the smell of Chinese food and whatever the hell the kid had had for breakfast. He hurried past another Sentinel Officer who was waiting for the delivery into the station proper.

The shield station wasn’t large. There was a small cafeteria, some bathrooms, and other than that, just the control room. That was where Ian was meant to spend the next six hours.

“Bronson, Chien,” Ian greeted the two officers as soon as he entered the control room. Against three walls were controls and consoles used to monitor the planetary shields. The fourth wall was all thick viewing glass, where they could see the line of ships looking to get into Vassar-1.

“Hmph,” grunted Chien.

Bronson said nothing. He was on the comms while Chien manned the scanners.

“Anything exciting happen while I was gone?” asked Ian as he dropped off his stuff and walked over to and stood in front of the viewing window. “No more ships making a break for the gate, I take it.”

Chien shook her head. “This is wrong, LT!” She, like Bronson, had family down on Vassar-1, and they weren’t allowed to leave their posts to see if their loved ones were okay. All they could do was wait and watch the news. They couldn’t even do their jobs, since the planetary doors were ordered shut until further notice.

“Wrong or not, we don’t have a choice.” Ian sat down and rubbed his temples. He’d developed a stress-induced headache. All he could think about was whether or not he would lose his job.

“Don’t we, though? We can take the elevator down. It’s not shut down or locked off,” pointed out Bronson.

“And get arrested for abandoning our posts? Not worth it. Your family is fine. I’m sure of it. These attacks down there, they seem to be directed at the government and military, not civilians.” Ian knew that wasn’t true, but at the moment, he needed his team to calm down.

“Bullshit!” yelled Bronson. He threw his water bottle across the control room.

Ian watched Bronson’s water bottle roll across the control room and stop at the base of the viewing window. He looked up from the water bottle and saw something impossible.

“What in the world?” Ian gasped.

An enormous ship arrived out of nowhere, as if it had just dropped out of a fold jump. That was crazy, of course, because fold jumps were impossible anywhere near the planetary shield. That was why the artificial gravity was pumped so far out into space, causing distortion ripples.

And yet, here it was. Nowhere on sensors a moment ago, and now—

An alarm sounded. Ian spun around and looked at the large screen of data along the back wall.

“Impossible,” he whispered.

The computer identified it as a UEF dreadnought. Not just any dreadnought, but a super dreadnought. It was enormous.

“Impossible,” he said again, a little louder this time. “There’s something wrong with the computer.”

There was only one ship like this one anywhere in the galaxy.

“Is that the *Atlas*?” asked Bronson as he and Chien joined Ian, looking out the window.

“It can’t be,” Ian said.

“Well, whatever it is, it’s huge,” Chien said. “And it sure as hell looks like the *Atlas*.”

Then the space around the so-called *Atlas* shimmered and two more dreadnaughts appeared. They looked exactly like the *Atlas* in both shape and size. The computer identified them both as the *Atlas* as well.

“H-how is this possible?” Bronson stammered. “There’s only one *Atlas*. How could the UEF make three of them and we didn’t know?”

“They couldn’t,” Ian said. “There’s no way they could.”

“Then what the hell are we looking at?” Chien said.

Ian shook his head. He couldn’t form words. The three largest warships he’d ever seen in his life were looming larger in the window by the moment.

Suddenly, identical swarms of fighters began to emerge from the three dreadnoughts. They banded together and started attacking the civilian ships and freighters still in line to get planetside.

The fighters swarmed past the ships and bore down on the gate. Somehow, the more conventional image of fighters bearing down on the station galvanized Ian’s thoughts.

“Send out a data package to fleet headquarters, Chien,” Ian said. “Do it now. Don’t think. Just do it.”

“But LT—”

“Do it, Chien!”

“Oh God,” Chien said, shrinking back from the window. “We’re dead.”

Ian turned back to the window.

The thrusters of hundreds of missiles lit up sky, all arcing downward, all coming straight towards the planetary shield station.

Behind him, Ian heard Chien and Bronson running away in a panic, screaming and blubbing.

Ian simply collapsed down on his ass, staring out slack-jawed as more firepower than he’d ever seen in his entire life descended on him.

He really missed being a beat cop.

BOOK 4: STAR FALLEN

PROLOGUE

Six years earlier ...

OFFICER DUCAR ROSSI stared at his reflection in one of the metallic sinks of City Sentinel Precinct 5 and wondered why he looked so old.

You *are* thirty, he told his freshly-shaven reflection. There was a time, and it didn't seem that long ago, when Ducar had thought that was old as shit. It was starting to look like his smartass, know-it-all teenage self had been right. He *was* old as shit.

Ducar splashed water over his face, knowing it wouldn't wash away the shame of what he'd done. Nothing could.

His radio squawked. "Rossi, where are you at, asshole? Sarge is down here starting the meeting, and it's not like there are so many of us in this unit that he can't tell you aren't here."

Ducar pulled off his radio. His hand was shaking. He tightened his grip and willed it to stop. "I hear you, Nooms," he said. "Tell him I'm in the little boy's room."

"You're taking a piss?" asked Specialist Amon Noomly, his best friend in the division. "Now? Man, I hope you can come up with a better excuse than that when you get down here."

"I'll leave that to you," Ducar said.

"I'm not covering for your ass—"

Ducar killed the link and clipped the radio back to his utility belt. He was halfway down the stairs to the precinct basement—home to the briefing room, armory, and every rat on the planet—when he got a video call on his HUD from Sergeant Vrabel.

Ducar ignored it and instead imagined himself in his apartment, two sheets to the wind and sucking down Bliss Sticks. He rounded into the briefing room with a scowl.

“Great! Now that Officer Rossi here has graced us with his presence, we can get started,” Vrabel said. Most of the other officers in attendance didn’t bother to turn around, and the few that did got a sour look for their trouble.

The briefing was short. Ducar barely paid attention. Part of that was due to his own apathy, but mostly it was because he already knew what the deal was. Unlike most of the others here, he’d been part of the trial group. They were just learning what they were getting into. Ducar *knew*. They weren’t just run-of-the-mill sentinels anymore. This was something new and untested. They were the freshly created anti-subversion division, or “subs,” for short.

Noomly pulled Ducar aside after the meeting. The hallway was busy with men heading to the armory. “Is your head right?” he asked.

Define right, Ducar thought. He nodded.

“You didn’t do anything wrong,” Nooms insisted, keeping his voice low. “Nobody knew that raid would go down like that.”

Nooms didn’t need to elaborate. There was only one raid he was talking about.

Ducar had watched it go down a thousand times in his head. The order to fire the stun canisters. Feeling the *thump* of his own canister launcher, then the self-satisfaction of watching it crash through the window of the rundown farm where the cult was meeting.

He could picture himself following his team through the back doorway, rifle up, and being surprised by the thick smoke and hysterical screams inside. Gunfire. Men shrieking. Children crying. A woman with a child in her arms, on fire, her hair melting to her scalp as she pleaded for someone to save her baby.

One of the stunners had malfunctioned. Nobody knew that there were a dozen small speeders clustered in one of the small hangars on the backside of the farm. Their fuel cells were piled up together. The stunner had sparked, and the pile blew up. Those that weren’t killed instantly had been

melted alive by the radiation from the burst cells. Nobody had radiation patches, so they'd had to call for them. Ducar had sat and held the hand of the mother with her burnt scalp and shoulders, watching her die and promising that he'd look after her baby. The baby had died a few minutes later. By the time the patches had arrived, there was nobody to administer them to.

"It was just one of those things," Noomly said.

"Just one of those things, Nooms," agreed Ducar. He patted his friend on the shoulder reassuringly. Noomly seemed relieved as he walked away.

Two minutes later, Ducar was in the armory getting suited up. He wanted to throw up as he clipped on his body armor. There was a time, not too long ago, when he remembered feeling pride while getting suited up. Once upon a time he'd been all about serving and protecting, not... whatever he'd become. Whatever they'd *made* him become.

With the rest of the team, he made his way up the stairs and into the waiting transport, just one of a dozen others in black tactical gear.

"I'm nervous. Is that...why am I so nervous?"

Ducar glanced at the rookie sitting next to him. The small, muscular woman had introduced herself before, but damned if he could remember her name.

"It's good to be nervous. Make you more alert, more prepared," he answered. The transport pulled away from the station on its way to the Bowery Slums in East Vassar-1.

"That's good, I guess." The woman held out her black-gloved hand for Ducar to shake. He reluctantly did so.

"Vesta," she said.

"Ducar," he said. "First deployment?"

"Yes...well, no. I spent a year as a patrol officer in the Cape, but never did anything like this before. Most I had to deal with were some street hoods. Broke up a couple fights. Had to roust some Bliss dealers. That's about it."

Ducar nodded. Not that different than his own background. He glanced around at the grim faces around them in the transport. Not that different from most of them, he wagered.

"This is a lot different than the street beat, Vesta. Do you know what you're getting yourself into?"

"Of course," she said. "Sergeant Vrabel recruited me."

If that was supposed to impress Ducar, it fell flat. “And what did he tell you?”

“We’re going into the Bowery to break up a ring of cultists. They’ve been taking in and brainwashing kids, miscreants and others—”

“Good.” Ducar cut Vesta off and forced a smile. “Just...do as you’re told, and everything will be okay.”

The transport came to a stop. Ducar and the other subs pulled their masks up over the bottom half of their faces. Then they checked their weapons, making sure they were loaded with hot rounds. Ducar remembered being told that a good raid was one that didn’t require a weapon to be discharged.

So far, he’d been on some pretty shitty raids.

When the doors of the vehicle opened, the sights, sounds, and smells of the Bowery Slums greeted him like an open sewer. This was the festering infection beneath the glamour of the shining AIC capital city of Vassar-1.

If the best that the outer colonies had to offer lived in the vividly-colored, artistically-unique buildings that dotted the landscape from space, then you needed somewhere else to put those who built them, cleaned them, and cooked in them. Those workers lived in the Downluck Slums, a collection of shantytowns that dotted the outskirts of the city. The Bowery was the worst of them.

It was tempting to say that this was just how the universe works, but that didn’t change the equation. Inside the shoddy homes and ramshackle structures of the Bowery, the worst of humanity thrived. Deprived of their chance at something better, they settled for figuring out ways to make the rest of the world as rotten as theirs.

But there was something new growing here: a cult, promising a better way. Their message was utterly absurd to Ducar, but he was starting to wonder if the hope they were peddling, however improbable, wasn’t more real than the justice he was tasked with meting out.

“All right. You know the drill: identify these bald-headed bastards, round ‘em up, and cuff ‘em. The wagons are on their way,” said Vrael with a bit too much enthusiasm, given the task at hand.

Ducar noticed that Vesta was breathing heavily. The rifle in her hands shook a bit. “Stay with me, Vesta.”

“Right. Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me yet. Wait until we get back to the precinct in one piece.”

Sub raids were always chaotic, in Ducar’s limited experience. Their job was to barge into homes, restaurants, bars, wherever and round up all whom the government deemed subversive. That actually meant they were after Oblivion cultists. In theory, they were after rebels as well, but really, it was just cultists.

The first five or ten minutes of that afternoon’s raids were a typical blur. Ducar led Vesta through the winding maze-like passages that ran along the side streets of the Bowery. Ducar kept stopping every couple of minutes whenever he found a landmark, trying to reorient himself. It was easy to get lost here, and usually fatal, too. The residents weren’t looking to make friends with the likes of Ducar and Vesta. He could feel their stares, filled with hatred, distrust, and in some cases, restrained violence.

“Where are we?” Vesta asked as she tried to catch her breath through the mask over her nose and mouth. “Maybe we should head back.”

Ducar felt like he’d been running for hours, chasing targets through the crowds of the heavily-populated slums, and could only imagine that Vesta felt it even more acutely.

“Not yet. Not until we get the signal in our HUDs from the sergeant.” Ducar wanted to leave as well. He’d been convinced to apply by Noomly, who seemed to thrive on the same adrenaline rush that held nothing for Ducar. But duty was duty.

“Did you hear that?” Vesta sharply turned her head in the direction of a woman’s screams.

“Hear what?” Ducar heard the screams, too, but pretended he didn’t. He knew they were the product of something terrible he didn’t want to stumble into down here. Back in his home precinct, he’d respond in a heartbeat. But a few months in the Bowery had changed him.

“Over there.” Vesta hurried in the direction of the screams..

“Shit,” Ducar said as he followed. “Wait! Vesta! Slow down!”

Vesta stopped at the entrance of what looked like some form of pop-up bar. It looked like someone’s home had been converted, probably to earn some extra credits. Who in the slums couldn’t use some extra credits?

“What is it?” Ducar didn’t really want to know the answer as he caught up with and walked up behind Vesta.

Vesta was staring, gobsmacked, at a horrendous scene unfolding in the makeshift bar. Another sub was on top of a bald woman, a cultist. He was forcefully kissing her neck as she fought him off. Her dirty, hand-cut skirt was hiked up to her waist; the sub had torn her shirt off and had it wrapped around his arm, and was shoving it down the woman's throat to cut off the screams. A young kid, perhaps hers, looked on as another sub restrained him with his boot, like the boy was a dog.

Ducar hadn't wanted to be here, because he'd assumed it was more violence between the residents. He'd assumed it was some homeless junky killing another one. A fight over table scraps, or who had the rights to the fire.

He'd never expected this. His mouth was dry. He felt his fingers twitching. Whatever sickness he'd felt in the pit of his stomach before, it galvanized into a ball of rage.

Vesta seemed to be frozen with fear or shock, or both. Ducar shoved her aside.

Calm as could be, feeling clearheaded for the first time in weeks, Ducar silently walked up behind the officer on top of the cultist woman.

Some tiny voice in the back of his mind told him to flip on his stunner. Even though he wanted put a bullet in the back of his fellow sentinel's head, he listened.

He shot an electric stunner into the neck of the creep, which still slammed his head forward and knocked him out cold. It elicited a scream from the would-be rape victim.

Ducar turned to the man's partner, who was fumbling to unholster his firearm, and shot a stunner into his face. His nose was broken by the impact, spraying Ducar with blood. He fell over backwards, landing next to the small boy, who ran to his mother without a second look behind him.

"What're you....?" Vesta watched, horrified, her eyes as big as thruster ports.

"What *am* I doing?" Ducar asked. He shook his head.

Vesta looked at him, a mixture of shock and disgust on her face. He could read her thoughts. *What the sub was doing was wrong, yes. But shooting fellow cops? That was worse.*

"When a dog goes feral and starts biting people," Ducar said, "you put it down." It was something his father had told him. He didn't feel bad at all. He couldn't remember the last time he'd felt so good. It was scary.

“Stewart!” the cultist said to the boy in her arms. Both of them cried.

“What are we going to do?” asked Vesta, still shocked. “What do we say?” She was on the verge of hysterics.

“Say nothing,” the woman said. She stood, pulling a long shawl around her body and hugging it tight to herself. “Neither will we.” She stroked her son’s hair. Her eyes suddenly filled with tears. “Thank you,” she said. “But you have to go.”

“But what about them?” Vesta asked, nodding at the two officers. Blood was pooling under under the one with the broken nose. Both were out cold.

“They’ll end up outside the walls,” the woman said. Her composure was returning, as was the boy’s. It was as if each of them, holding each other, gave strength to the other.

“Not dead?” Ducar asked, wondering at the disappointment in his voice. Something had broken inside him. How he’d managed to stun them and not kill them was beyond him.

“Not dead,” she said. “Too much attention. But memory wiped.”

Vesta looked at Ducar.

“She’s right,” he said simply. He took one last look around the makeshift bar. He’d not even realized that there were several others here, but they’d already all turned their backs. No one made eye contact. No one glanced around. It seemed like they were making a tacit agreement that they’d seen nothing.

Ducar began to turn around when the boy’s voice stopped him.

“They should stay,” he said. “They should meet him.”

“Stewart,” the mother said kindly. “These are police. While we’re thankful for their help, they don’t belong with us.”

Ducar noticed the temperature in the room cooling the longer he stayed. The mother wasn’t wrong. He’d done right by the people here, but they weren’t looking to make him a statue.

“Everyone belongs in the Abyss, mommy. Everyone, even the lost. Like him.” The son made eye contact with Ducar. There was something in the kid’s gaze that made Ducar’s head buzz.

“We should go,” urged Vesta.

Ducar raised his hand in a signal for Vesta to wait. He was intrigued. “Meet who?”

The little boy smiled. “The Pale Man.”

ONE

Now ...

AS THE AIC military transport that had picked her up from the Senate Circle hovered over the business district, Director Engano worked to control her rage.

Engano had never lived among the people of Vassar-1. She lived above them in luxury apartment towers, or in sections of the city such as the Diamond Quarter and Oak Hill. She had been born wealthy, and had stayed that way. She'd spent the first half of her career trying to convince people that she cared about those less fortunate than her, and the rest of it knowing nobody believed her.

All Engano could feel now, as she looked down on Vassar-1 burning, was anger and sorrow. She genuinely felt bad for all those innocent lives that had surely perished in the Oblivion terrorist attacks. They didn't deserve it. What they deserved was their police and military's protection. What they deserved was better than Engano and her ilk had given them.

What really bothered Engano, above all else, was the fact that this was never supposed to happen. The UEF and AIC were at war, sure, but neither dared attack the other's capital planet. Mutually assured destruction was the best of deterrents.

The UEF was constantly developing planet-destroying weapons. Chief among them was the unnamed secret project on Earth's moon. All reports

that AIC spies brought back said it was a massive stationary rail cannon capable of hitting a target hundreds of trillions of light years away, propelled by gravity itself.

Naturally, the AIC had to create a counter-weapon. Only a select few, including the soldiers manning their planet-killing weapon, knew where it was. Everyone stationed there was specifically chosen because they had no family and few friends. They were loners who'd have no reason to ever tell or even communicate with any outside parties. Mutually assured destruction kept either side from using their mega-weapons, and also kept them from taking the fight to each other's homes.

The feeling that Engano had failed the citizens of Vassar-1 would creep up later, she knew: when she was alone, trying and failing to bury her past with the help of booze, men, or both. Probably both. Definitely both.

But right that moment, alone in her thoughts in the back of the transport, she allowed her fury and rage to come to the forefront. She wanted someone to pay. She wanted blood, a pound of flesh.

"Take me to the Bowery," she ordered the pilot through her HUD.

"The slums, ma'am? Are you sure?"

"That's what I said. Let's hit these assholes where it hurts, in their home. Radio base, have them send some backup. We're raiding their damn temple." Engano wasn't thinking straight, but she didn't have any other plan.

"Ma'am, respectfully, we need to get you—"

"Do it," she snapped. "If someone was going to blast me out of the sky, it would have happened by now. And the best way to make sure you bastards actually move is to put myself in harm's way first."

The city sentinels and the high militias were hard at work, killing or capturing any terrorists across the city. There was no time for organized raids on known cells, but there was no need for it, either. The bastards were brazenly making themselves known now.

Things seemed as if they were coming under control, but Engano saw that as a bad sign. So instead of joining the efforts to finish off or corral the last of the cultists, she wanted to hit them where she knew it would hurt. She was counting on a certain element of surprise. The cultists were acting like magicians trying to draw attention away from their trick, whatever it was, but Engano wasn't interested in allowing herself and her forces to be led around by sleight of hand. She'd take the offensive.

Only a couple of minutes from the Bowery, Engano readied herself. She demanded a rifle from one of her escorts and prepared to set boots down herself. If she was going to order this, she would damn well take part.

The escorts glanced at each other. The one closest to her said, “Ma’am, I can’t let you—”

“Not only are you going to let me, you’re going to volunteer to give me your flak jacket and helmet along with your rifle. You wouldn’t allow me to land in such a hot zone without protection.”

The men again exchanged glances.

“Or would you prefer I was unarmed and ill-protected?”

The one closest to her warily complied.

“One minute until touch down, ma’am,” said the pilot through Engano’s HUD.

Her hands started to sweat. It’d been awhile since she’d been in the field, both as an agent and as a soldier. But she assured herself it was like riding a bike. It’d all come back as soon as she hopped back on.

As the transport lowered, Engano saw more and more of the streets, and it was much more horrific than looking on from up high. There were bodies everywhere. The denizens of the areas around the Bowery hadn’t been spared by their cultist neighbors.

Dozens of dead littered the square that the AIC military wanted to set down on. So instead of actually landing, they had to hover a couple of feet above the cobblestone-covered ground. Engano was one of the first to jump out, narrowly missing a deceased woman face-down in her own blood. The six soldiers in the transport with her followed.

Just as Engano’s transport set off, another landed. It was some of the backup she’d ordered. Six more soldiers joined the pre-raid group. Another half a dozen should’ve been on their way, but Engano didn’t want to wait.

Engano knew that speed would be key. If any of the Oblivion leadership or members were still at their temple in the Bowery, they wouldn’t stick around for long. So she gave the order.

“We’re heading in, straight on. Your group, go around to the west entrance. The temple’s in the middle, we’ll meet you there. Eliminate any cultists you come across, regardless if they’re armed or not. There’ll be no prisoners until we reach the objective. Understood?”

“Ma’am, what if we—”

“No prisoners.”

Engano looked across the square at the second group of soldiers, who stared back, waiting for an acknowledgment of her order.

“Understood,” came the answer in her HUD at last.

“All right, let’s go,” Engano said.

But the words were barely out of her mouth when several of the supposedly dead civilians in the square outside sprang up off the cobblestone and started firing at them.

TWO

TWO IN ENGANO'S group went down, each catching a bullet to the back of their head and back respectively. One from the other group was also killed instantly.

Engano turned and knelt down in one fluid motion. "Behind us!" she screamed, completely unnecessarily, as everyone had figured that out by now.

She took down one of the cultists, an old man in ragged clothing holding an ancient slug gun, with a pair of shots to his chest. The rifle felt strange at her shoulder, and she allowed the kick to push her third shot high, but the damage was done. The man crumpled and fell.

Reasserting her grip and leaning harder into the next shots, she expertly placed two rounds in the face of the young terrorist next to him. She tried not to think about the fact that she'd actually been aiming for his chest. She watched the boy collapse, and he *was* a boy. But he'd been holding a gun and pointing it at her.

Something rumbled in the pit of Engano's stomach. The sharpshooter in her wasn't exactly coming back just like riding a bike, and the cold-blooded killer was even more difficult to coax out of retirement. Even so, with the help of her small team of officers, the ambushing cultists were all dead in less than a minute.

But they were just the initial contact in what was looking like a well-thought-out trap to greet any unwanted visitors. Shots broke out from inside the Bowery itself, preventing Engano's now smaller, pinned-down group from entering. The other group, however, must have evaded the notice of

the shooters inside. Within a few minutes, they managed to work their way around the far side and hit the group from behind.

In the crossfire, Engano quickly led her team on an assault of the front gate. As the fire diminished, a tall sergeant kicked open the slum gate. Engano followed him in and surveyed the dozens of dead in the square.

Super-heated high velocity bullets screamed past overhead.

She lifted up one of the corpses—taking care that this one was actually dead and not another shooter playing possum—and took cover behind it. Another AIC soldier was lost in the secondary ambush. She was down to three.

Up the hill from their position, and holding the higher ground, were dozens more positions firing down on them. What few officers remaining from the group that had initially come from behind the first group were now hopelessly pinned down, themselves hiding from gunfire coming from further behind them.

“HUD, call AIC Base 24,” ordered Engano.

“This is B24. What can I do for you, Madam Director?” answered a young soldier on the other end of the HUD.

“I need an immediate drone airstrike,” she said calmly. “I’m painting the target now. Need this one in a hurry, terrorists have us pinned down.”

“Say again, ma’am,” the soldier replied. “It sounded like you said—”

“Do it fast!” she barked.

To his credit, the young man caught on fast. “Understood,” he snapped. “We’ll have inbound eyes on your position in forty seconds.”

“Make it thirty,” she said. “HUD, end call.”

Engano used a laser on her rifle to mark the side of a burnt-out temple that seemed to have gunfire coming from every window. It was also the kind of place where innocents might be hiding, but if that was the case, then the terrorists were using them as human shields. She didn’t see anything to suggest that was the case, but she didn’t see anything to dissuade her of what she expected the terrorists to try, either.

In her experience, collateral damage was a part of fighting extremists and terrorists. It often created more enemies, but it was the ones right in front of her that she had to worry about. ‘To make omelets, you have to break some eggs.’ That was something her mother used to say. She probably hadn’t meant for her only daughter to use it to rationalize killing

non-combatants, but Engano had to justify this somehow. *You're a sick bitch*, she told herself.

“Incoming strike, take cover!” Engano yelled out to her three remaining AIC support. She hid behind her human meat cover, keeping her target painted, and waited for the incoming missiles.

The whole outer border of the Bowery that linked to the temple on both sides disappeared, along with the temple itself, in a series of loud explosions. Even behind her human shield, Engano could feel the intense heat after the drone-launched missiles hit their mark. The ground shook under her. It shook so violently, in fact, that some of the cobblestones became dislodged. And in the immediate wake, the gunshots ended.

“Everyone okay? Sound off!” Engano stood up and immediately checked on the three soldiers still with her.

“I’m good!”

“Safe and sound, ma’am.”

“Ready to roll.”

“Okay.” Engano looked at the damage from the drone strike. The ramshackle homes of the Bowery, just inside the wall, had stood no chance against the missiles, and the resulting damage was proof of that fact.

Engano led the way in. She stepped carefully through the wreckage of the drone-struck homes. At one point she felt something squishy under the thin corrugated metal wall she stepped over. She tried to ignore it, and the implication that it was organic remains.

Through the smoke and fire, Engano emerged into the labyrinthine alleyways of the Bowery. She followed the holographically-projected directions in her HUD to the temple in the slum’s center.

Curious and frightened residents stuck their heads out their doors and windows to see what the hell was going on. “Go back in your homes! Now!” ordered Engano. The soldiers that followed her did the same.

More terrorist gunfire opened up from a stack of hand-built homes. That brought Engano and her group’s progress to a screeching halt. Before going any further, they needed to deal with the threat.

Engano nodded to one of her men and he shoulder-charged a nearby door, knocking it off its shoddily-made hinges. Engano rushed in behind him and scared the family that lived there half to death. They huddled under a table in the kitchen—which clearly functioned as the living room and bedroom as well.

There was no time to reassure them. Engano peeked around the corner of the entrance to the home and almost took a shot to the face. She leaned back as plaster was blown from the wall, and then returned fire, with little aim around the corner. But that allowed one of the soldiers with her to slide in low and, using her covering fire, he quickly dispatched the shooters.

Typical of Oblivion cultists, the attackers were poorly trained, if trained at all. They could barely hit something standing a few feet ahead of them, let alone a moving intelligent target that could fight back. But two of them at the very top of a set of stairs were entrenched behind enough cover that they were almost impossible to take out. That's when Engano got an idea.

"Stay here, keep them occupied!" she ordered. Then she ran back out of the ramshackle house and looked for one of the myriad ladders leaning against the wall. The houses were built on top of each other here, and it was customary for every roof to simply be another floor for the next level of illegal construction. She found one and made her way up to the first roof level of the slum.

When she did, she had to pause a second to catch her breath and survey the area. She saw where she needed to go to flank the terrorists from above, but there was no good way to get there.

As quickly as she could, Engano made her way across the rooftops. She made it about forty feet before she heard a loud siren.

It was the last sound she'd ever thought she would ever hear. That siren meant that the planetary defenses were breached.

Engano looked up. She saw the ever-present glowing blue of the planetary shields dissolving. It was an alarming sight, but nowhere near as alarming as what came next.

She watched as forty or fifty AIC fighter ships flew upwards into the sky to meet whatever enemy was coming. They weren't enough. That became quite apparent when three UEF dreadnoughts became visible in the skies above Vassar-1.

"You have to be kidding me," she said aloud. Were the Oblivion cultists working with the UEF? Could even they sink so low?

Engano's first instinct was to get on her HUD and try to figure out what the hell was going on. But as soon as the AIC fighters sent to engage the invaders started falling out of the sky as deadly fireballs, her HUD didn't work. Nothing electronic worked, not even the targeting display on her rifle.

She looked back up, trying to work out what she could do to help at this point, when the make and model of the lead dreadnought became clear.

And it wasn't just a dreadnought. It was a super dreadnought. The only one in existence.

Except the two just behind it looked the same.

She gasped.

It was the *Atlas*. They all were. But that was impossible.

Engano watched on helplessly as hundreds of UEF fighters began to pour out of all three super dreadnoughts.

And then the enormous forward cannons on the lead *Atlas* began to fire.

THREE

ENGANO FELT HER SHOULDERS SLUMP. The terrorist attacks were bad, but the city could recover from them. But the sheer power of the dreadnought cannons ensured death and devastation on a whole different scale.

For the first time since she was a child, she felt tears on her cheeks. They were tears of helplessness, standing on the rooftops of the Bowery Slums and watching the energy beams stream down into the heart of Vassar-1.

A UEF fighter sped towards Bowery, nimbly avoiding Vassar-1's anti-air cannons. The fighter made its way through the fireworks in the sky, and looked like it was heading straight for Engano herself.

At first, Engano thought it was all in her head. There was no way a single UEF fighter would come after just her. But when it started firing at her, rounds easily punching through the roof of the improvised structure on which she stood, she revised her opinion. Maybe it was dumb luck or maybe it was purposeful, but it didn't matter. It was firing on her.

The only thing that saved her was the fact that the construction was so poorly done that the roof collapsed immediately under the barrage of fire, and she fell through moments before the deadly string of slugs could reach her.

Engano hit the ground hard. Pieces of roof fell on top of her. It took her a few moments to regain her bearings. When she did, what she saw was gruesome.

When Engano looked down, the floor beneath her was covered with blood. She looked for the source. It didn't take long before she saw the arm

of a dead AIC soldier, then the leg of another. There were five soldiers here, or at least portions of them. She only knew the number because she knew how big the squad had been. This was the team that had gone into the Bowery from the west. Something or someone had practically ripped them to shreds.

Beyond the walls, thanks to the open roof, she could hear clearly what was happening in the slums beyond. She could still hear gunfire. The staccato sound of AIC weapons was clear.

But then, suddenly, it all stopped. The gunshots were replaced with screams.

Engano picked up one of the dead soldier's guns lying on the ground near her and ran to the front of the house. She peered out, but saw no activity.

I'll be damned if all was for nothing.

She ran through the streets, hugging the sides of the homes and staying low. After she reached the temple and killed whoever was there, she told herself, she'd turn her attention to the UEF invaders.

All Engano could hear was the sound of her own heart pounding and her own heavy breathing as she searched the alleyways of the Bowery. But the streets made little sense to her. She couldn't find her way without her HUD to help her out.

Part of her admired her enemies for their strategy. First they sprang a coordinated attack by the cultists; then they took out the city's HUDs, leaving them even more vulnerable to the UEF invasion force. Truly it was brilliant, if only that was the plan, but part of her knew it wasn't. Part of her was well aware of the truth, even if she didn't want to think about it right now. This wasn't a UEF military invasion, whatever it looked like. This was an alien invasion.

Finally, after what felt like hours, Engano found herself staring at the opening to the Oblivion's temple. Dead cultists littered the entrance.

Like her own soldiers, the cultists, too, were dismembered. Blood and guts were splashed across the surrounding walls and streets like some macabre art installation. She felt the bile rise up in her throat, and fought it down.

What did this?

Engano had seen many terrible things in her life. She'd seen the atrocities of war firsthand. She'd overseen and undertaken assassinations

herself. Once she'd even walked through a plague-decimated colony in unknown space. But she'd never seen carnage like this at the Oblivion temple.

Engano almost tripped over a severed arm as she slowly approached the pitch-black temple entrance. That was when she heard a gunshot inside and saw brief glimpses of muzzle flashes.

In another life, one that she'd lived before the transport had set down outside the walls of the Bowery, she would have announced her entrance. "This is AIC Intelligence," she'd say. "Anyone in here needs to come out now! Put your hands up and surrender."

But not anymore. Now she crouched low and slowly approached the temple entrance, quiet as a mouse, her head on a swivel.

Inside was a long hallway. The further she went, the darker it got. She'd give anything for her infrared eyes right now, the ones she required of her agents. Reluctantly, she switched on the flashlight attached under the barrel of her newly-acquired gun, knowing how much of a target it made her.

At first, all Engano saw were more mutilated bodies and body parts. There was nothing but death in the temple. It was already starting to smell of feces and bloated flesh, and she knew that would only get worse as the rot set in. She shook the thought from her mind.

Then, as she slowly surveyed the innards, something caught her eye.

In the middle of the temple, which seemed to consist of one large, almost cavernous room, was a display case. A piece of black rock floated behind plasma. Unlike the plasma fields found in the average ship's docking bay, this plasma field was designed not to let anything breach it.

"You've got to be kidding me," Engano whispered out loud. "This is where they're hiding it?"

She knew what the shiny, fist-sized black rock was immediately, even if she'd never seen it in person before. The few agents that had gotten in and back out had described it clearly enough, and really, even without their first-hand accounts, she'd know it. This was a piece of the Herald Stone.

The Herald Stone was the only solid, quantifiable thing the Oblivion cult worshipped. There might or might not be more than one in the galaxy. There were rumors of one on Earth, and on at least two of the colony worlds.

But she'd always known there was one on Vassar-1, ever since her spies had told her so. The Bowery, at the heart of the slums and home to the

largest of their temples, was an obvious place for it. But she'd imagined it somewhere other than here, sitting prominently in what appeared to be a not-particularly-sacred portion of the temple.

Then again, what she knew of what actually happened in the Oblivion temples was diminishingly small, especially for someone who prided herself on intelligence knowledge.

Engano knew that the Oblivion claimed it was a piece of the very thing that had birthed their mysterious saviors. She wasn't convinced. As far as she was concerned, it was just a damn rock. But if the terrorists valued it so, it was worth taking. At least something would come of this disastrous raid.

Engano was well beyond caring about security alarms going off. She just wanted the Herald Stone. So she used all her strength to kick at the display stand, eventually dislodging it from the floor and sending it tumbling over. When it crashed down, the plasma shields disabled themselves, and the shiny black rock fell.

As she bent over to pick up the Herald Stone, Engano heard whispering behind her. A woman's voice, she thought. She slipped the rock into her pocket as she swung her rifle around, the light whipping across the far wall.

Shadows stretched everywhere.

The room was big, so she could've missed someone. She slowly started running the light back across the far wall of the temple. She tried to ignore the sounds of chaos and devastation outside, and homed in on the whispered voice she heard. Definitely a woman's voice, she decided as she considered it in her mind.

Then Engano saw her. A woman was pinned against the far wall by a man in black robes. Her eyes grew large and frightened for a moment, and then they turned lifeless and cold.

"Don't move!" yelled Engano. She pointed her rifle at the man in black robes. His back was to her. He slowly stood and turned around. "I said don't move," she barked out, before her words caught in her throat as she saw the man's features in her flashlight beam.

His face was human, but simultaneously not. His jaw hung unnaturally low, slack, filled with needle-like teeth and dripping with the now-dead woman's blood. His eyes were as black as the Herald Stone she had in her pocket. Both of his hands were lined with talons instead of fingers, and he let out a horrible screech that made Engano jump and her ears ring.

“Nope, not doing this,” Engano said aloud, forcing herself out of her state of shock. She immediately turned and ran for the front entrance.

When she emerged from the temple, she was confronted by three AIC soldiers.

“I’m glad to see you,” Engano said. She took two steps, then stopped.

Her next words died in her throat as she saw their faces. These men weren’t with her team. They were with the other team. The one she’d seen in pieces.

She blinked, trying to make her mind pull the pieces together. Was she wrong? It had been chaotic. Maybe...no. The men standing in front of her were too clean. No dirt. No mud. Not a single drop of blood on them or their uniforms.

“Boys,” Engano said, nodding slowly as she tried to walk around the far side of the entrance steps and as far from the soldiers as possible. “Maybe I’ll just go ahead and you stay here,” she said, babbling now. “For cleanup. And to meet the other teams that I’ve called and that will be here very, very soon.”

She nodded along to her own words, as if she was willing them to sound better.

The soldiers started to fidget. The way they moved wasn’t natural. It looked like old-fashioned film, skipping frames.

The moment Engano reached the bottom step, every instinct in her told her to run. So she did.

The nearest soldier reached out for her. Fueled by adrenaline, Engano barely felt as he sliced into the back of her calf with something. She didn’t look back to see if he kept following, or if the others joined in. She just kept moving.

Engano was stopped by the sight of a family blocking the alleyway. She urged them to move, but they just stared at her blankly. The mother of the family opened her mouth wide, revealing sharp teeth, screeching as she charged the Director of Intelligence.

After firing half a power mag into the screeching mother, Engano realized the bullets were doing little to slow the mother, who was a monster of some kind. Even more shocking, the wounds started closing on their own.

It was clear that she couldn’t get past whatever the family was, and she didn’t have time to climb upwards.

All she had left was right under her feet.

FOUR

“WAIT, WHAT ABOUT MORGAN?” Ada asked as she climbed down the ladder that connected to the dank hidden room behind LeFay’s food dispenser.

“Clarissa,” LeFay answered. “And she can’t come with us.”

Ada tried to stop on the ladder mid-descent to argue, but LeFay kept coming down above her, forcing her to keep going. “We can’t just leave her,” Ada insisted.

“We can and we will,” answered LeFay coolly.

“Then what did we do all this for—”

The smell of the sewers hit Ada hard. It was a warm sewage smell that she could feel cling to her clothes and skin. It wafted up from below, and she suddenly had a sense of how they were going to sneak away from LeFay’s building. It was better than dying, she figured, but as the smell intensified, she wasn’t sure just how much better.

“What did you save her for if you’re just going to abandon her?” Ada tried again. She gagged a little on the question. She was going to have to hold her nose soon.

“Agent Moreno wouldn’t want us to die trying to save her.”

“Agent who?” yelled Ace from further down the ladder. “And please, dear God, tell me this isn’t leading where I think it’s leading.”

“Morgan,” LeFay said, eyeing Ada. Ada could see that LeFay was considering just spilling the beans on Morgan as an undercover agent, and maybe that was for the best. It was Ben, after all, that seemed to have a problem with just telling everyone, not Ada. “Morgan wouldn’t want us

sacrificing ourselves to save her, especially in the state she's in. I know her well enough to know that."

Ada finally reached the bottom of the steps and found herself standing next to Ace. LeFay was the last one down. She hopped down and splashed into the black water and sent it splashing up on the others.

"Screw me," Ace said. "If I'd known I'd end up standing in a foot of sewer water—"

"You'd what?" LeFay asked. "Change your mind? There's still time." She hooked her thumb up the ladder behind her.

Ada didn't want to come across as a whiner like Ace, but she had to admit that she wasn't thrilled to feel her socks get soaked as she stepped away to make room for LeFay. This was a bad time to learn that her boots were leaking. The smell, combined with the rats that scurried about in the darkness, confirmed that they were indeed in a sewer.

"Can't see a damn thing," Ace said sourly.

"Calm down," Ada said. She had bigger problems—like who the hell those guys were back at New Dawn Bio Hacks, and why they'd acted so strangely around Ben. She glanced up at him. He was acting no differently than usual, which was to say slightly irritating, in a way she couldn't quite put her finger on.

"I'm sick of people telling me to calm down!" Ace spat. "What about our current messed-up situation is conducive to being calm?"

"Conducive?" LeFay asked, as she lit a flare that painted the surroundings blue. "I barely know ya, pretty boy, but that feels like a big word for ya."

"Yeah, you don't know me!" Ace barked. He swung the business end of his rifle menacingly at LeFay. She didn't flinch. "And I don't know you. None of us do. So why should we trust you? How do we know you just didn't call those weird bloody-face bastards on us? How do we know you aren't Oblivion, too?"

LeFay walked toward Ace until his rifle was in her face, then kept coming until he was forced to decide between shoving it in her mouth or lowering it. He lowered it.

"You don't. And you're right not to trust me. I don't trust any of you, either, but I trust that woman up there."

She hooked a thumb at the ceiling, and Ada knew she meant Morgan. Or rather, Agent Moreno. Clarissa. Damn, she'd have to wrap her mind

around that.

“And if she vouches for you, then I’ll help you,” LeFay continued. “As much as I can. Now, we need to get moving before they get wise and give that food dispenser a good look.”

“She’s right,” Ben said. He’d been silent since they’d dropped down into the sewer. “We have to move.”

“I don’t like leaving anyone behind, even Morgan,” Ada said. She glanced at Ben, knowing he was the only other one besides LeFay that knew the truth about her.

“*Epecially Morgan,*” Ace said icily. “She’s the reason we got down in one piece to begin with.”

Ben put his hand on Ace’s shoulder. “We aren’t abandoning her. We’ll figure something out. But right now, we’re literally wading in shit, and we need to find a way up to some safe fresh air. LeFay, I’m assuming you know a way out?”

So now he was going to be a leader again, Ada thought. *Flip that switch when it suits you.*

“I do,” LeFay said. “It won’t be in the nicest part of town, but I don’t think locals are the biggest danger at the moment.”

“Lead the way,” Ben said, letting LeFay pass him; then he followed along with the rest of the group.

“Thanks,” she said sarcastically, and Ada had a feeling LeFay felt the same way about Ben’s fickle leadership that she did.

“Ada?”

Ada glanced over at Francesca, who walked right beside her. “Yeah?” she said as she gingerly stepped past some floating trash.

“Why is this happening?”

Francesca sounded genuinely confused. Ada was reminded that, for all intents and purposes, she was just a kid. How could a kid process all that was happening to her?

“I wish I knew. Really. I wish I did.”

“It’s because those damn cultists called their alien saviors to come kill us all,” Ace said angrily. “Morgan knew the score as well as I did. That’s what’s happening. Crazy people doing crazy shit, and now all the sane people have to deal with it.”

“Cool it, Ace,” Ben said. “The last thing we need right now is to listen to you.”

“You have answers, big shot?” Ace shot back. “You’re the one who set us on this damn mission. Morgan and I, we just wanted to hunt bastards like those guys up there, hunt them and kill them. Simple, clean justice. But nooo, you had to go looking for daddy and the aliens that killed him.”

“Morgan was fine with going along,” Ben said under his breath.

Ada suspected that was true. Morgan had more in mind than just hunting and killing. And now that she understood what Morgan was, Ada knew why. She wanted to understand what had happened to the *Atlas* just as much as Ben did, but for different reasons.

But Ace didn’t know that, and didn’t look like he cared anyway. He looked like he wanted a fight. Which, to be fair, seemed to be his default position.

“Still not an answer,” Ace said.

“You really need to shut up,” said Ben.

“Or what? You’ll kill me? Beat me up with your damn robot arm? Both of those sound better than this.”

“Don’t listen to them,” Tomas said. He’d slid back to be beside Francesca and Ada, allowing Ben and Ace to argue as they followed right behind LeFay. Ada didn’t want a huge separation in the group, but a little distance wasn’t a bad thing at the moment.

“But what *is* happening?” Francesca repeated.

“None of us got the answers on that one, kiddo,” Tomas said. “Just gotta put it out of your mind.”

FIVE

THAT WAS ludicrous advice as far as Ada was concerned, and she doubted that Tomas really believed it either. The group's lives had been on the edge of a knife ever since Sanctuary Station-33. Francesca wasn't wrong to look for answers.

But Ada could try to occupy the teen's mind, at least.

"Where are you from?" she asked, cursing herself for the awkward abruptness of the question. "I'm just curious. I never thought to ask before, and now I feel shitty for that."

Francesca looked genuinely surprised. "It's not your fault," she said. She looked down at the grey water as she continued to answer. "Me? I'm originally from Earth. A small town in the Central Sector of North America, just outside Boise."

Tomas jerked his head up. "One of the regulated gen-mod farms?"

Francesca nodded in surprise. "You know about that?"

Tomas laughed. "I was born on the GMO pipeline to the supercities," he said. "A little place called Topeka. Ever heard of it, farm girl?"

Francesca snorted with laughter. "Topeka, a little place? More factory than farm."

"More automation than half the world, that's for sure," Tomas said. "But that's regulated agriculture for you. Besides, we kept those farms in business."

"Barely," Francesca said. "City farmer," she said with a little sparkle in her eye, opening up like Ada hadn't heard in a long time.

"Hayseed," Tomas shot back playfully.

Ada was suddenly far less interested in what Ben and Ace were arguing about up ahead. “So you’re a farm girl?” she laughed. “And I thought Tomas was the only one.”

“Did you just call me a girl?” Tomas asked smartly.

“You know what I mean.”

Francesca laughed too. “I’m the real thing, unlike this city slicker. I used to milk cows when I was a kid. Hard for me to imagine now.”

“So what brought a farm girl to a Sanctuary Station in the outer edges of known space?” asked Ada. She wanted to keep the conversation going, for her own sake as much as Francesca’s.

“Same thing that brought my dad to the Central Sector. Farming. He was a scientist. I don’t know for sure what he did. I should’ve asked him,” Francesca said, shaking her head. “Why did I never ask him? Anyway, he figured out a way to grow cereal grains faster than normal, with half the resources and no sunlight. As you can imagine, it was a valuable discovery.”

“Daddy got rich,” Tomas said.

“Not quite,” Francesca said, “but we did okay.”

“I never would’ve pegged you as a kid who came from money. A little spoiled, maybe.” Ada playfully punched Francesca on the arm. “But not a rich girl.”

“That’s because we were never rich. You see, my dad, he...so, for example, when I was five I got attacked by the neighboring farm’s dog. It was bad. I almost lost an arm.” Francesca rolled up one of her sleeves. There was a large scar on it. “My dad didn’t call the police. He didn’t go over and shoot the dog. Instead he asked if we could watch it for a couple of weeks. As I was in the hospital, it learned to trust new people, was treated like our own by my family. And when I got back, all stitched up and scared, he made me interact with it.

“At first I was terrified, you know. But, then it jumped up and licked my face. My dad explained to me that the dog was just scared of me and had attacked out of fear. He said that everyone is decent, every living thing, until it’s scared. And my dad’s invention, we called it his magic corn, since it was a maize variation; it scared the government and the companies that owned the corporate farms in the Central Section.

“As soon as my dad refused to sell his magic corn to the UEF and the corporate farms, the death threats started coming in. So he moved us to the

big city, to Seattle, tried to get work in a lab there. No one would hire him, and the death threats kept coming. Then one night my mom was attacked on her way back from the grocery store. The guys who did it told her at knifepoint that if her husband sold his formula to any of the colonist groups, they'd cut her and the baby in her belly. My brother Tom." Francesca's gaze was back down again, staring at the sewer water.

Ada hadn't expected Francesca to open up so much. Since she'd saved the teen on Sanctuary Station-33, she'd never heard her say more than two sentences.

"So your family, you ran?" asked Ada, even though she knew the answer.

"We had to. First we made our way off-planet to Lunar. The moon, it was...hard. Life there is not for people like my dad. He was gentle, you know? Not soft, but not callous. With that said, he always protected us, so he took us away from the moon. We went to Mars."

"Mars?" Tomas asked in surprise, echoing Ada's own thoughts. "There's only mining settlements there. If your father was, uh, not callous, how did he manage to do that sort of work?"

Ada kept looking down to make sure she didn't step on something more unsavory than what her boots were already steeped in.

"He didn't," Francesca said. "He offered a couple of independent mine owners the opportunity to better feed their men with his enhanced maize. His thinking was that so far from home, his presence would go under the radar and he could make enough credits for us to leave and go to a more hospitable planet. A nicer one."

"But that's not the way it went," Ada said.

"No, no it's not."

"It stinks down here!" Ace barked, interrupting both his argument with Ben and the discussion with Francesca. "How long do we have to—"

His complaint was interrupted, in turn, by a loud rumbling noise that reverberated through the tunnel. Pieces of the sewer ceiling crumbled down. Nothing huge, but enough to notice.

"What was that?" Ben asked.

There was another loud rumble, and another. Then, even under the streets, under the city, the group heard sirens.

"I know that sound," LeFay said as she stopped and cupped her ear upwards. "That siren. They only play that in case of emergencies."

“Maybe because there’s a hell of a big emergency going out there that we just escaped from,” Tomas said.

“No. If that were the case, they would’ve sounded it earlier. This is something else.”

Ben looked around and locked eyes with Ada. She hadn’t known him long, but she knew when somebody was thinking of doing something stupid.

There was a loud explosion up above. It dislodged a large chunk of stone from the sewer ceiling. Vassar-1 might be a technological marvel, but the materials that made up the city infrastructure hadn’t changed much in untold years.

The rock barely missed LeFay, who calmly sidestepped it with perfect timing.

Ace frowned. “How did you do that?”

“Let’s keep moving,” Ben said. “We’ll worry about what that is up there once we climb out of this literal shit.”

After a few minutes of trudging in silence, with occasional rumblings continuing to reverberate through the sewer, a light suddenly appeared in the darkness just ahead of them.

It was an open manhole.

Then something, or someone, fell through.

SIX

BEN DIDN'T TRUST LEFAY. Her relationship with the woman he now knew as Clarissa Moreno, an operative of the powerful AIC Intelligence Agency, meant she was unreliable at best.

He was still struggling to understand how he'd been so wrong about Moreno. In the short time that he'd known her and Ace, he'd come to trust her implicitly.

He did trust Ada. He was growing to think of her as the only person he *could* trust.

He was certain that LeFay was leading them into a trap. He wanted desperately to share his concerns with Ada, but the chance hadn't come yet. He was just figuring out an excuse to split the group up when the figure dropped through the manhole cover.

"Who's there?" Ben called.

The person who had fallen through the manhole—and it was a person, not a body or a bomb as he'd first feared—managed to splash down in the murky water without badly injuring themselves, at least as far as he could tell.

LeFay tossed her blue flare in the stranger's direction.

The flare lit up a middle-aged woman who looked to be in good physical shape, but Ben saw now that he was wrong about her condition. She was clearly hurt, although he wasn't sure the fall had done it. Her eyes were wide and panicked, the whites clearly visible in the flare light, but not scared.

She picked up the flare and ran towards the group.

"Stop," Ben ordered.

“Don’t come any further!” warned Tomas.

He and Ada pointed their weapon at the mystery woman, as did Ace, who was closer and more likely to shoot first and ask questions never.

LeFay crossed her arms and cocked her head. Francesca lagged back behind everyone.

“Easy,” Ben murmured to Ace. “I don’t see a weapon.”

“Easy yourself,” he hissed back.

“Shoot me if you want, but I’m not stopping!” yelled the mystery woman as she kept coming.

“Don’t mind if I do,” Ace shouted back. But he didn’t move his finger to the trigger of his rifle.

Ben was about to try and end the stalemate when a loud screech reverberated through the sewers. He knew the sound instantly, and it made his blood run cold.

“No way,” Ace said, his voice suddenly high-pitched. “No damn way.”

“You gotta be kidding me,” Tomas said.

“How is this possible, man?” Ace said, shaking his head. He looked like he might cry.

Of course, the creatures had had no intention on stopping at Sanctuary Station-33. Ben must have felt that in his gut the moment they escaped that floating morgue, but the dawning certainty that the nightmare had followed them from space still made him want to puke.

“Bastards,” Ada breathed. Ben found her grim, determined look reassuring.

Two Shapeless with the twisted visages of AIC soldiers dropped down through the open manhole.

“Friends of yours?” LeFay asked.

The creatures screeched and growled as they manipulated their bodies, their arms twisting into sharp, curving blades that they waved menacingly.

The mystery woman, practically forgotten, ran past Ben and then the rest of the group. A bolt of adrenaline shot through Ben as he found his own rifle at his shoulder without even thinking about it.

He sighted on the nearest of the two Shapeless and fired. “Die, bastard.”

But it didn’t die, of course, even as the rest of the group unloaded on the Shapeless monsters with their rifles.

“Fall back,” Ben shouted. He knew their weapons would do nothing more than slow the Shapeless down. They all did.

“We need to get out of here,” Ada barked.

She was backing up now, along with Tomas. Ace had given up all pretense of firing behind him, and was just hustling to keep up with the mystery woman, who still hadn’t slowed.

“What in the holy hell are these things?” asked LeFay. For the first time since Ben had met her, she looked unnerved. Considering the Shapeless were taking bullet after bullet and not going down, Ben could understand why.

“You don’t want to know,” he said. “Just run!”

LeFay finally turned as Ben grabbed her arm. She shook it off and started sprinting faster than he could hope to keep up with. She scooped up Francesca, who was lagging behind the others, leaving Ben at the rear of the group.

“Run!” yelled Ada, as if Ben wasn’t already doing that.

But where? We got nothing. We weren’t ready for this.

SEVEN

ADA RACKED HER BRAIN, trying to think of some way to fight the Shapeless without welding torches, without flamethrowers, without cold-cast guns.

Learning fast, the Shapeless started dodging the bullets as best they could. Sometimes they moved out of the way. Other times, they simply morphed their bodies to avoid getting hit. The bullets that missed ricocheted off the walls of the sewer. Some hit the pipes that ran along the ceiling.

The pipes!

Ada hadn't paid them any attention when they'd first entered the sewer. But she did now.

There were several pipes and wires that lined the tunnel ceiling. One of them, colored a dull red that set it off from the others, had a universal symbol for a gas line plastered on it at regular intervals. At least, she thought that was the symbol. She couldn't tell for sure. The light was too weak, and the pipes too old and encrusted. At this point, she'd take anything that required a hazard symbol. She just had to hope it was a gas line and not a toxic liquid.

Who was she kidding? The toxic liquid was what they were splashing through right now.

Ada aimed at the pipe just ahead of the advancing Shapeless. Not trusting her aim as she ran backwards with her heart pounding, she fired off a stream of super-heated bullets.

The pipeline instantly erupted right over the heads of the Shapeless, engulfing them in flames.

"Yes! Eat that, assholes!" she bellowed.

Then the rest of the line up and down the sewer exploded as well, mixing with the toxic atmosphere inside the sewer and practically igniting the air all around them.

An ever-growing ball of flames roared in the group's direction.

"Shit," Ada said, spinning around. "Shit, shit, shit."

There was nowhere to go but down into the grey water, into the human waste. "Get down," she screamed at the others.

"What the shit!" was the last thing she heard further down the sewer before diving into a little over a foot of raw sewage.

While face-down in the sewage, Ada felt an intense heat on the parts of her back that hadn't been covered by water. She heard muffled screeches and tried her best not to open her eyes, inhale through her nose, or take in any of the filthy waste.

Once the intensity of the heat died down, Ada got up. Before she could call out to check on the others, she heard Ace screaming curses up at the universe and everything in it.

"They're all right," Ben said. Ada hadn't realized that he'd stayed back with her while the rest of the group had fled further up the tube.

"We're not all right!" Ace barked. "You just tried to blow us up."

"She didn't just try," LeFay said. She picked something unsavory off her shoulder. They were all covered in shit from head to toe.

Ben slipped past Ada and approached a still-smoldering heap of charred flesh that lay spread out against one of the sewer walls. It looked like someone had thrown a giant tomato against a wall, then blowtorched it.

He poured soiled water out of his rifle's barrel. "Not a fan of the afterparty, but it got the job done."

"Seemed smart in the moment," Ada said. "Didn't really think it through."

Ben turned around. "Saved our asses," he said. "We'd be dead if it weren't for you."

Ada waited for the other shoe to drop. "Okay," she said at last, when she realized there wasn't some openly condescending remark coming, and then decided maybe she'd missed it. "You don't have to sound so surprised about it."

"I'm not," Ben said, shaking his head in wonder. "I'm really not."

Ada heard someone throw up behind her. She turned to see Francesca bent over.

“You okay?” Ada asked as she rushed over to help her up.

“No,” Francesca said. “I... I swallowed water.” She threw up again.

Ada helped hold her hair back. *Poor thing*, she thought. This was a hell nobody deserved.

“Almost smells as bad as that old farm,” Tomas said.

Ada was about to wave him away. There were times for jokes, and this wasn’t one of them. But before she could, she heard Francesca crack up laughing.

“Actually, it’s worse,” the teen said. “But still better than that armpit you lived in.”

“Hey,” Ben said, looking back at the group. “I think we’ve got a problem here.” He was closely examining the charred Shapeless remains on the sewer wall.

Tomas started to turn, but Ada indicated he should stay with Francesca. The two of them seemed to have a connection. Instead, she walked over to join Ben. “What is it?” she asked.

“Look at this here,” he said, pointing at the wall.

“What?”

“We only got one of them,” Ben said.

“What?”

“Look.” He nodded to part of the stain that slipped down below the waterline. “One got fried. But one went ... well.”

“In the water,” Ada realized with a shock. “But then where—”

Francesca’s scream pierced the silence.

EIGHT

FOR ADA, time froze. Her mind raced, but her body couldn't seem to move. Terrible things could do that in a moment. It just happened too fast.

The alien spike exploded out of the sewage under Francesca and impaled her through the chest, exploding out of her back and ripping half her spinal column with it. Tomas jerked backwards in shock as the teen was lifted off the ground and slammed upward against the sewer ceiling.

The Shapeless rose up out of the sewage, spreading its body in every direction, almost skewering LeFay and Ace in the process. They, like Tomas, stumbled backwards.

The creature screeched out in pain, half of its body crispy and burnt. By all appearances it was a gravely-injured animal, cornered, lashing out. Francesca's blood flowed down its outstretched limb, still pinned to the concrete ceiling.

Finally, time came unstuck for Ada. She felt rage propel her forward.

"You son of a bitch!" she screamed, unloading everything she had at the Shapeless monster. One by one, Tomas, Ace, and Ben followed suit.

The Shapeless dropped Francesca's lifeless body to the sewer floor and swung its limbs around wildly. Ada could see now that it was badly burnt. It couldn't live long like that, she thought, and she wanted to be the one to kill it.

She bore down on the open wounds she saw, firing again and again at it. "Die, you bastard thing, die!"

LeFay tackled Ada a moment before one of its wildly-swinging limbs sliced through the air where she'd been standing.

"Get off me!" she snarled at LeFay.

“With pleasure,” LeFay said, standing. But then she backhanded Ada and sent her sprawling backwards.

Ada rolled over and got to her feet just as LeFay took out a small pistol-sized grenade launcher from—well, it wasn’t exactly clear where she’d gotten it. She fired one round at the ceiling above the Shapeless creature.

Whatever the charges she fired were, they were powerful. Either that, or the crumbling sewer was even less stable than Ada thought. It was probably a little bit of both, she decided.

Large chunks of the sewer ceiling fell on the Shapeless creature, immediately silencing it. LeFay calmly opened up her grenade launcher and threw away the empty cartridge. She then loaded another one. “Back up, boys and girls,” she said.

Ada crawled over to Francesca’s body and dragged it clear with the help of Ace, who kept cursing the universe under his breath. Ben and Tomas, who’d joined in the initial barrage of fire on the alien, also helped.

“Now, let’s make sure you stay asleep,” LeFay said. She fired another grenade into the pile of rubble, then spun around. Sewage and rock flew up behind her as she walked away.

Ada fell down to her knees next to Francesca and cradled her head. She was gone. The only thing that brought Ada any comfort was the thought that the teen was with her family now.

“Goddammit,” Ben said, shaking his head and slamming his rifle down. It slid down the rock face and stopped just above the water. “I’m sorry, Ada.”

“What the hell are those things doing here?” Ace barked.

“And what exactly *are* those things?” asked LeFay. She loaded another grenade round.

“Death,” answered Ada in a quiet voice.

“We don’t know,” said Tomas.

Ada felt Ben put his hand gently on her shoulder. She felt a sudden violent urge to shrug it off, but resisted it. She was just looking for something or someone to lash out at. It was the damn aliens she should hate.

“It’s ... I’m sorry,” Ben said again. Ada could tell he wanted to say more, but for once he held his tongue.

Ada felt hot tears on her cheeks as she cradled Francesca. She deserved better. They all deserved better. She seethed as she sniffed back the bitter

tears. *These damn aliens are going to pay.*

“LeFay, is that you?” The mysterious woman from earlier came walking back through the darkness to the group.

Ada had honestly forgotten about the woman. She’d assumed she’d just kept running.

“Madam Director,” LeFay said. A smirk grew on her face, but her movements looked guarded to Ada. She didn’t trust this woman. “Fancy meeting you here.”

“I’m sorry, who the hell is this woman?” Ace snapped. For once, Ada was glad for his short temper. She wanted a little of his unfocused hatred at the world.

“Meet AIC Intelligence Director Heather Engano,” LeFay said. “The top know-it-all on Vassar-1.”

Engano frowned at LeFay. “And you’re the top pain in my ass. Or were.”

LeFay crossed her arms. “I know you’re used to spending your days knee-deep in shit, Director, but it’s typically a bit more ... abstract.”

Engano was ignoring LeFay and scanning the group. She stopped on Ben’s face, then squinted and took a couple more steps. “I know you. You’re ...” Her eyes grew wide. “You’re Saito’s son.”

She looked at LeFay for confirmation. “Is it?”

“It’s him,” LeFay nodded.

“I am,” Ben furrowed his brow. “How did you know that?”

“Unbelievable,” Engano said under her breath. “To meet you, of all people, down here in the sewers.”

“Which you still haven’t explained your presence in,” said LeFay. “Just a casual dip?”

“Don’t worry about it, tinkerer,” Engano said dismissively. “Anyway, Ben—may I call you Ben?” She didn’t wait for an answer. “I know everything my agents are up to. That includes who they’re running with. Agent Moreno told me all about you, son of the great Captain Lee Saito, commander of the *Atlas*. The same goddamn *Atlas* that is, at this very moment, reducing this planet and city to ash.” She paused. “One of three, actually. And when the hell did that happen?”

Ben shook his head. “What are you talking about?”

“Who the shit is Agent Moreno?” Ace asked.

“You must be Ace,” Engano said. “That intellect really gives you away.” She scanned the rest of them. “And Ada. And Tomas.” She nodded as if she were reading off a dossier. Then she looked down at the broken body of Francesca. “Finally that brings us to ... I don’t know the dead teenager’s name.”

The callousness of it made Ada’s blood boil. “Francesca,” she snarled, standing up, ready to punch Engano in her face. “Her name is Francesca. Not that it’s any of your damn business.”

“Ah, yes. Sorry. That’s a tough way to go.”

“Moreno’s gone, too,” LeFay said. “If not dead, then with the cultists, which I think we both know is worse.”

Ben stepped forward, and Ada had the impression he did it to put himself between her and Engano. She felt the anger like needles in her shoulders, and had to give Ben some credit. He was probably right to keep her away from the smug bitch.

“What did you mean, the *Atlas* is turning this planet and city to ash?” Ben asked.

“Oh, you didn’t hear the news? Your dear old dad’s flagship is out there right now giving us a pounding to remember, along with the other two ships in that class that we didn’t even know existed. And thanks for that, by the way. Because I wasn’t already feeling inadequate enough as an intelligence director.” Engano shook her head. “First the cult, then the UEF. It’s a hell of a one-two punch, but what I don’t get is why. And where do those, whatever those things are, fit in?”

“There’s only one *Atlas*, and it was destroyed,” Ben said. “We all saw it.”

“I was *on* it when it was destroyed,” Ada said quietly. “So if you think the *Atlas* is attacking this rock, you’re more delusional than you look, lady.”

Engano gave Ada a once-over. “Moreno had a soft spot for you, but I’m starting to wonder why.”

Ada felt a fresh wave of rage. Somehow this woman had managed to elevate herself to somewhere just below the aliens on her shit list in record time.

“Cut the bullshit, Heather,” LeFay said. “We need a safe place to go. Do you know anywhere?”

Engano’s cold eyes turned to LeFay, but they had little effect on her. “I do, as a matter of fact. Would you all like to join me? Normally I don’t take

in strays, but in honor of Agent Moreno, I'll make an exception."

"Who the hell is Agent Moreno?" Ace roared.

"Morgan, you idiot," Engano said. "The one you called Morgan was a double agent. She had been for her entire life on Earth. Her name was Agent Clarissa Moreno."

Ace stared at her, slack-jawed. "What?"

Engano sighed. "Do I really have to repeat it?"

"Bullshit," Ace said at last. He looked at Ben. "Can you believe this crazy lady?"

Ben shifted his weight from one foot to the other. "I wanted to tell you when the time was right." He stared daggers at Engano. "But I guess that time never came."

"No way. For real?" Tomas said. "She was with the AIC?"

"No," Ace said. "No, no, no, *no*. This is bullshit. It can't be."

"Are we really going to have to sit here and wait until this sinks in for the genius here?" Engano asked.

"It's kind of a bombshell," Ada said. "Maybe you can lighten up."

LeFay snorted. "That'll be the day."

"She's dead anyway, right? So this is academic."

"Morgan isn't dead," Ben said matter-of-factly. "Or Clarissa. Whatever. She's not dead." He almost believed it himself.

"Technically true, the last time we saw her," LeFay acknowledged.

"It doesn't matter now," Engano said. She shook her head. "I'm not sure what does, anymore."

"Well, that's a hell of a pep talk, boss," LeFay said. "But maybe you could, you know, lead the way?"

Engano shook her head at LeFay. "Fine. Follow me, then. If the old maps are right, a few turns should take us somewhere relatively safe. But nowhere is really safe right now."

"Why should we follow you?" asked Ben.

Engano looked at Ben like he'd lost his mind. "What choice do you have?" She waited a moment for him to say something, then turned to LeFay. "Are these people all this stupid?"

"The one that's already figured out you're a bitch isn't," said LeFay, nodding at Ada.

Engano chuckled. "Figures." She looked at Tomas. "What about you? Nothing to say?"

“I—”

“Gah,” Engano said, cutting him off and starting to walk down the sewer, without waiting to see if anyone was following her.

“We’re seriously going to trust her?” Ben asked LeFay.

“We can’t trust her,” LeFay said. “Believe me. The lady is the queen of spooks. But we should follow her.”

“Why?”

“Because she wants to save her own ass,” Ada said, coming up behind Ben. “And that’s good enough. For now.”

LeFay picked up Ben’s rifle and handed it to him. “If it makes you feel better, you can still lead.”

“Is it me, or have you gotten even more condescending since we first met?” Ben asked as he took the rifle.

“I think you’ve gotten a tiny bit smarter since we first met,” LeFay said. “So that’s something.”

“Do you have a sense of where she’s leading us?” Ben asked as they started after Engano.

“If I had to guess,” LeFay replied, “I’d say hell.”

NINE

LEE SAITO WOKE up from what felt like a very long dream. He found himself in what looked like a barber's chair, but he knew damn well he wasn't in any barber shop, especially when he took a look at his surroundings.

Saito was in a large room with undulating walls that seemed to alternate between opaque and transparent. When he could see through them, he could see outside what he knew was the Shapeless' ship.

How long had he been out? And where was the Pale Man?

"Oh good, honey, you're up."

Saito knew it was his wife Beverly's voice. For a second, as he looked over and saw the spitting image of his wife walking over to him, Saito forgot that she was dead. He forgot that the thing walking up to him wasn't his wife; she was a creature. But only for a moment.

"Where is he?" asked Saito as he sat up in the barber's chair.

"Where's who, darling? It's only me and you here." Beverly leaned on the chair and ran her fingers through Saito's hair.

"Him!" Saito spat. "Your leader." He pushed Beverly's hand away and got up out of the chair.

"He's not your concern right now, my love. He got what he needed from you. Well, most of it. Enough to move forward." Beverly stood by the chair, looking innocent.

He took what he needed. Now I remember.

The events of the past few hours came rushing back to Saito. He recalled traveling through his memories alongside the Pale Man. Among

those memories, really the last one, he'd given the aliens a tour of the UEF *Atlas*.

"Move forward with what?" Saito asked, feeling dread creeping through his mind.

"Go take a look. Take a look at the great works you're helping us with, Lee, my love." Beverly smiled as she pointed towards one of the room's constantly-moving walls. It opened up to form a massive viewing window.

Saito stumbled over to the wall. It looked as if he was about to keep walking out into the vacuum of space itself before his hands stopped him, hitting the window. When he looked out, he couldn't believe what he saw.

There, in the very close distance, was the light blue glow of a planetary shield. It only took him a moment to work out what planet this was. They were over the AIC capital of Vassar-1.

"What are we doing here?" asked Saito.

He understood that the Pale Man didn't care about most of his memories. What he wanted was information on the *Atlas*. The aliens wanted to copy it, become it and its crew, just like the creature masqueraded as himself.

But what he couldn't understand was why. What was the aliens' endgame, and what could it possibly have to do with Vassar-1?

"You need to slow this ship down," he said. Even with his mind racing, he was a ship's captain first and foremost. They were on a collision course with a line of ships waiting outside the planet's entrance. There were civilian ships, freighters and long haulers. None of them were military. "Slow it down! You're going to run into those ships!"

"Please calm down, Lee," urged Beverly as she walked over to him.

"Calm down? You're about to murder innocent people!"

Beverly wrapped her arms around Saito's waist from behind. Her grip was tight, belying her size. He couldn't pull away if he tried. "We're not murdering anyone."

The Shapeless flagship rammed into the line of ships. The civilian craft were crushed in seconds, overwhelmed by the giant alien ship. Their contents, cargo and human alike, gushed into the vacuum of space. Saito felt his knees weaken at the carnage.

"Think of it as freeing them. Freeing them from the vessels of rotting meat and bone that are their prisons. We're sending them to someplace much more peaceful, a place of silent happiness."

“No! I can’t just stand here and watch as you monsters kill who knows how many people!”

Saito was about to leave the window and go to try and fight, in any way he could, even if his efforts were futile. He’d have to start by breaking free of Beverly’s grip, but then he realized it wasn’t her holding him in place. Something else was stopping him from moving, something cold.

Saito was horrified when he looked down and saw that the black pulsing substance that was plugged into the torso wounds he’d suffered on the *Atlas* had changed. Tendrils protruded from those wounds and anchored his whole body to the floor. It felt so foreign and cold, like his intestines were dipped in ice cubes.

“Just...watch, baby. Watch and you’ll see. You’ll see the awakening of thousands, no, millions. And you’ll witness the beauty of liberation.” Beverly squeezed harder. She nestled her chin on Saito’s shoulder as he kept struggling to free himself.

“Liberation? This is...” Saito watched on, appalled, as the Shapeless ship he was in just kept moving forward, plowing through innocents like a hot knife through butter. It was clear they were heading straight towards Vassar-1, with no intention of stopping.

“Freedom,” answered Beverly.

TEN

WHAT HAVE they done to me? What did they do to me?

Saito clawed at the tendrils coming out of his own body. But they couldn't be dislodged; they couldn't be clawed off. Each little piece he managed to pry off got replaced within seconds. He was stuck. He was stuck, and was forced to be witness to genocide.

When the Shapeless flagship reached the planetary shields, leaving wreckage and death in its wake, the room Saito was anchored in changed. He recognized its new shape. He was in the command deck of the UEF *Atlas*, except he wasn't.

Part of Saito was impressed by how close the Shapeless reproduction of the command deck was. It was almost perfect. And yet, his mind didn't accept it. There were small details off, details too small for him to pinpoint, but they must be there.

The Shapeless' recreation of the *Atlas* command deck also came with a fake crew. At least, that's what Saito figured at first. But as he looked closer, he saw that these faux UEF Naval personnel were actually doing what the real versions would do. They were doing their jobs.

"Are you ready, Mr. Saito?"

Saito felt a chill run down his spine. Sitting in the commander's chair was the Pale Man.

Instinct made Saito lunge forward to try and attack him, but the tendrils pulled him back. Out of frustration and anger, he yelled out, exhausting the extensive library of expletives he'd accumulated over his lifetime.

"Please try and relax, my friend," the Pale Man said.

Then he began to transform in front of Saito. It was a grotesque sight: eyes changing, organs popping out and into place; bones, teeth, everything swirled around in a meaty blob until the final form took its place. When he finished, Saito found himself staring at a perfect replica of himself in the *Atlas*' command chair. "This should be quite a show," his doppelganger said.

Saito's tendrils forced him up to the video screens that served as the faux *Atlas* command deck's viewing window. Suspended high above the floor, he was at the direct eye level of the scene he absolutely didn't want to watch.

"Closing your eyes won't make it any easier. It won't make any of this go away," said the fake Captain Saito.

The real Saito didn't want to listen. He closed his eyes as he heard the familiar sound of UEF dreadnought cannons going to work on the planetary shields. Specifically, they aimed at the station that controlled the door that served as the only entrance and exit for the planet.

Saito opened his eyes when he didn't hear, but felt, that the station manning the door and Vassar-1's planetary shield was gone. All it was was a ball of flames, dancing in zero gravity. It was almost beautiful until he saw the floating bodies, already frozen solid by the unforgiving cold of space.

"There's no way to make it go away, Mr. Saito. This is happening whether you want it to or not, and part of you doesn't want it to, for you aren't them anymore. Not fully. You're something more. You are what we'll all be. Sooner, rather than later." The false Saito sat back in his chair.

Both Saito and the fake version of him sat and watched as the planetary shields buckled under the mighty forward motion of the alien *Atlas* as her alien fighters destroyed the entrance station.

"Forward, get us down to that planet as quickly as possible," ordered fake Saito. There was a smug smile on his face, as if he'd really accomplished something. It made the real Saito sick.

"Captain, we have inco, income, incoming. We have incoming ships, sir," one of the Shapeless, pretending to be a pilot, informed the false commander.

"Don't panic, pilot. We're prepared for this. Arm the cannons and deploy our fighters as soon as we exit the atmosphere. Let's give these

friends a fight they will forget.” The false Saito hadn’t quite fully mastered sayings in Earth standard.

The Shapeless flagship entered the atmosphere. At first, Saito could’ve sworn he heard the whole vessel scream out in pain. It was from the friction of the entry. All of the surfaces in the interior of the command deck shifted a bit, convulsed, before returning to normal.

It’s alive? This whole ship is alive?

Saito put aside his horror for one moment to digest what he’d just learned. That information might’ve been useful earlier, especially the part where it reacted so poorly to extreme temperatures, just like the Shapeless themselves.

Once out of the atmosphere, all Saito could see were clouds right out to the curve of the small world, but the clouds weren’t all white. Nor were they grey storm clouds. Parts of them were black. Countless fires were burning in the city below. Whatever was happening down there, it seemed to be working in favor of the Pale Man.

AIC fighter ships came barreling out of the clouds and immediately opened fire on the Shapeless. They focused their fire on the fake *Atlas*, which was a mistake, because it was armed with everything the real original had. That included a litany of anti-fighter defenses.

“What’s your recommendation here, Mr. Saito? What would you do in this situation?” asked false Saito in a mocking tone.

Saito didn’t answer. He just watched and hoped for what he knew was impossible. He hoped that one of those fighters would hit the fake *Atlas* just right to disable it or, even better, destroy it, taking him, the Pale Man, and his fake wife with it.

“No answers? You don’t want to help, huh? I get that. Thing is, you don’t have a choice, friend.”

Suddenly Saito felt a sharp pain in his torso where the anchoring tentacles originated. They started to pulse. The sensation felt like someone was pulling teeth, but instead of his teeth, it was his brain.

“Ah, of course. Simple enough,” the false Saito said. “Brute force really is the way of your people, isn’t it?”

Like a gigantic metal porcupine with cannons instead of spikes, the fake *Atlas* unloaded on the AIC fighters. For the first time, Saito seemed to realize there was fire coming from more than just the ship he was on.

As if reading his mind, his doppelganger turned to him and smiled. “Oh yes, we’ve added a little wrinkle, just to keep things interesting. But don’t worry; this is still the *Atlas* that matters.”

Saito suddenly had a vision of the metal ball in space around the sanctuary station, absorbing and reabsorbing ships into its mass. If those other two ships were identical in size to the *Atlas*, then if they were somehow absorbed back into the ship that Saito was on right now, their mass would make a single *Atlas* of almost unimaginable scale.

The small, lightly-shielded ships stood little chance. One by one the vessels met their ends in balls of fire and shrapnel, or fell back down towards the city like burning rain. The Shapeless ships continued to descend.

It became clear to Saito exactly how much the Shapeless had planned this all out when the fake *Atlas* made it through the clouds and he got a clear view of Vassar-1 below. Even from this height, he could see the city was in chaos. He looked around at all the fires and smoke, rising up from so many sights he couldn’t begin to count. Like on Earth, they must have used terrorist attacks to sow the chaos needed to cover their own approach.

“Yes, our friends helped us. You call them a cult. We call them believers.”

“Can you read my mind?”

“Soon, you’ll be able to hear what I’m thinking as well. Then you’ll understand. But for now, open your mind to me, or we can force our way in. Your choice.”

“Like hell,” Saito growled.

“Very well.”

Saito tried to fight the forceful mining of his mind. It was a hard battle, one that he wasn’t used to, but he wasn’t going to give up. Instinct told him to think about something other than war and tactics. He needed to focus on something that would shield his other thoughts from the Shapeless. Only one thing came to mind.

For about ten seconds, Saito pictured his wife, the real Beverly, holding their newborn son in the hospital. It was the happiest single moment of his life.

“I applaud your tactics,” said the false Saito as he literally clapped. He didn’t quite understand figures of speech yet. “But it’s not enough.”

Saito yelped in pain, teeth gritted, as cold hands reached in and began picking at his brain.

“The harder you fight, the worse this will be. With or without your mind, we *will* flatten this city. We will burn this world to the ground.”

Head still ringing and aching from being pried open, Saito could barely stay conscious. He might as well have passed out, because he was in a daze, unable to really process anything he saw or heard.

It seemed like he was having an out-of-body experience as he watched himself being lowered by his tendrils to the command deck floor. Nor did he feel Beverly pick him up.

“Take him back to his quarters. Make him comfortable. We have much work still to do.”

ELEVEN

BEN STOOD at the base of the ladder.

He didn't know where it led, although Engano had said it was safe. All he knew was that they needed out of those sewers. But without their HUDs, it was risky.

"Why are we letting him go first again?" Engano asked for the umpteenth time.

"Because I said so," Ben said stubbornly. He didn't trust her not to have something up her sleeve, and he wasn't going to put anyone else at risk if he could help it. It wasn't like he had that much left to live for. "You can guide us, but I'm going first."

"Leave the kid alone," LeFay said. "If he wants to stick his head up first and get it blasted off, I support that."

"Ridiculous," Engano said. "Every other person here is more qualified."

LeFay nodded. "Since it's so safe, though, it shouldn't matter, right?"

"It should be fine," Engano said.

"Consider me reassured," LeFay said.

The bickering between the two of them was getting tiresome for Ben, and that was saying something. He'd come here with Ace and Clarissa. He'd lost track of how many times he'd expected their tiffs to turn into open gun battles.

"If you do get dead, though," LeFay said, "I'm taking that rifle."

"Thanks for the support," Ben said. LeFay was still impossible to read, and even less trustworthy now than before, as far as he was concerned. It wasn't clear to him whose side she was on.

Ben slung his rifle around his shoulder and started to climb. The rungs were rusty and rough, but somehow slippery as well. When he reached the top, he was faced with a heavy manhole cover.

“Son of a—!” Ben quickly retracted his hand as soon as he touched the manhole cover. It burned him.

“What’s wrong?” asked Ada as she and the rest of the group looked up at him.

“It’s hot, really damn hot.” Ben looked at the manhole cover. Through the little holes in it, where water drained down into the sewer, he saw what looked like fire.

“Maybe we should move on some,” said Tomas.

“No, we need to go up here,” Engano insisted. “This should be in the Government District. There’s safe rooms scattered around there, plus we can re-arm ourselves.”

“You sure that’s where we are? Without our HUDs, and it’s a big city,” Ada said.

“One hundred percent? No, but I’m pretty sure. Either way, we can’t stay down here. Those things will find us. Hell, they already did, once.”

Ben listened and agreed that Engano had a point. “Hold on. I think I got this.” He repositioned himself on the ladder to use his artificial arm to dislodge the manhole cover.

Ben wasn’t prepared for what he saw when he poked his head up out of the open manhole. The Oblivion cult did a lot of damage, sure, but it was damage that could’ve been easily fixed. But with the Shapeless, the scale of the devastation they unleashed was on a different level.

Luckily the manhole was in the middle of the street, because the buildings on both sides were on fire. Ben could feel the intensity of the heat against his face. It was so extreme, it felt like his eyes were slowly cooked, evaporating the tears that tried to protect them.

A UEF fighter screamed past overhead before unloading a couple of bombs about half a mile away. Ben felt the ladder and ground shake from the force of the explosions. He’d be lying if he said his resolve didn’t take a hit as well.

“How bad is it?” Ace called up.

“Not good,” answered Ben.

“Like on a scale of pretty bad to a hellscape, where we at?”

“Definitely on the hell end of the spectrum,” Ben said as he climbed up out of the manhole onto the street. He didn’t see any movement. “Come on up,” he said.

One by one, Ben helped everyone up out of the sewer. Ada was the last one up. She took one look around and said, “We’re too exposed here out in the open. We have to move, and fast.” She turned to Engano. “You know where we are?”

Engano scanned the buildings.

“Well?” LeFay hissed.

“I’m looking for landmarks,” Engano snapped back. “Give me a second.”

“Good luck finding landmarks in this burning pile of shit,” Tomas said, and Ben was forced to agree. The damage here from the relentless bombardment of the Shapeless forces was extreme.

But Engano was as good as her word. “We’re right outside the district. We need to go that way,” she said, pointing towards a side street that wasn’t in quite as bad a shape as the one they were on. The fires hadn’t reached it yet.

Before anyone could reply, Engano started off in that direction, head down, moving with purpose.

“She’s not really a team player, is she?” Ben murmured.

“Sure she is,” LeFay said, coming up beside him. “Her team. And we’re not on it.”

Ben started hustling along next to LeFay, with the others falling in behind. “Sounds like you used to be.”

“Yeah, funny story, that,” she said.

Ben waited for her to elaborate, but LeFay seemed to be finished talking. “And you tell it so well,” he said at last.

“Not story time,” she said. “But remind me to tell you later. If we aren’t dead.”

The small side street was in better shape than the main, but it was by no means untouched. Ben saw hands sticking out of the rubble from collapsed, bombed-out ceilings. He saw one poor soul’s body slung halfway out a shattered window, the upper half of their torso lifelessly hanging. One of the shops on the street must’ve made machine parts, because they were strewn all over the street. A thick black smoke hung around, making it hard

to breathe, his eyes watering. And the smell was like death, burning wood, and cooking meat.

“Hug the wall,” Ada said urgently.

Ben did it without question. It took a moment before he heard the tell-tale sound of a ship somewhere overhead. He glanced up, and his heart raced as a UEF fighter slowly passed right above his head. “It’s looking for something,” he said.

“Or someone,” Engano said. “We need to keep—”

“Did you see that?” Ada said.

“See what?” Ben asked.

“I saw it, too,” Tomas said.

“Saw *what*?” Ace demanded.

“Those weren’t from the *Atlas*,” Ada said. “The Marine HQ was right on the hangar side with those fighters. I got a good look at them.”

“Those looked like damn UEF fighters to me,” Ace said. “Just because you don’t recognize the tail code doesn’t mean—”

“There was no tail code,” Tomas said.

“What?” Ben asked. “Are you sure?”

“Positive,” Ada said. “No tail code.”

Now it was Ace and Ben’s turn to exchange a look. They might not have been on the *Atlas* like Ada and Tomas had, but they didn’t need to be on that exact ship to know that there wasn’t a single starship-based UEF squadron in the universe that flew without tail codes.

“So what does that mean?” Ben asked.

“It’s them,” Ada said flatly. “It’s the Shapeless.”

TWELVE

“WAIT, are you telling me that those damn things are mimicking entire fighters now?” Ace whispered loudly. “Somebody please tell me that’s not what we’re saying.”

“Not just that,” Ben said, as the realization dawned on him. “They’re mimicking entire spaceships.” He turned to Engano. “I know this will sound crazy, but that’s what those ships are. It’s not the *Atlas* or some *Atlas*-class ships, as if those even exist. Those ships aren’t the UEF at all. They’re those aliens, the same ones we just saw down in the sewer. I know it sounds crazy, but I swear—”

“It doesn’t sound crazy,” Engano said.

Ben felt more surprised by that than the realization of what was happening here. “It doesn’t?”

“Agent Moreno said she saw this happening at a sphere in space near the sanctuary station.”

Ben felt like he’d been punched in the gut. “She didn’t say anything to us about that.”

“Maybe she did and you weren’t listening,” Engano said. “It doesn’t seem to be one of your skills. Luckily, it’s one of mine.”

“What did I tell you,” LeFay said. “The top know-it-all around.”

“If I knew anything at all, I’d have been able to stop this,” Engano said darkly. “So don’t tell me what I know.”

As the shadow of the ship slipped past, Ben couldn’t help but think about the odds of their situation. Here they were, six survivors watching an alien invasion unfold around them. He stared at Ada, still covered in Francesca’s blood. All he could think was that he’d failed. He’d failed the

group. He'd certainly failed that teen girl, who'd wanted nothing more than to survive.

"All clear," Ace said. The Shapeless faux UEF ship had moved on.

Ben swallowed down his doubt. There was nowhere to go but forward. "Where is this taking us?" he asked as he stepped away from the wall and continued down the narrow street.

"It's gonna take us into the Government District," Engano said. "Through a back way, one not many people know. From there we can make it to the Senate Circle. The bomb shelter there...it's got everything we need." She kept her eyes on the sky as she limped along with the group.

"Everything we need for what?" inquired Ada.

"To survive, endure, hold out long enough to figure out a way to fight back. Or escape," answered Engano.

"And how in the hell do we fight that?" Ace pointed up at the smoke-filled sky. One of the *Atlas*-shaped dreadnoughts hovered far overhead.

"By being smarter than them," replied LeFay. "Which means most of you are screwed." She looked at Ace. "Especially you."

Ace flipped her off.

After two more side streets, Ben found himself staring at a locked gate with an old-fashioned keypad. "You gotta be kidding," he murmured to himself.

"How quaint," LeFay said as she saw the keypad.

Engano entered in a numerical code. "Sometimes it's the old tech that works best. Hard to hack. You should appreciate that, tinkerer." The gate latch popped, and it swung open.

"After you," Ben said to Engano.

"What a gentleman," she said.

Beyond the gate, the Government District had more open space than just about any other part of Vassar-1, so it was easier to traverse. There was less cover, for sure, but they weren't choking on smoke from burning buildings. They just had to move fast and smart.

"So where's this shelter?" asked Ben as he and the rest of the group emerged into the open courts and plazas of the Government District. It was clear they couldn't stay here and had to move. If not, they were sitting ducks.

Engano pointed at a large amphitheater-shaped building that sat on the far side of an enormous, wide-open courtyard.

“That’s a lot of open space—*shit*.” Ben barely started to speak before Engano started off across the courtyard.

“Either she has a death wish, or she knows something we don’t know,” Ada said.

“She definitely knows plenty we don’t know,” LeFay said. “But she also thinks the universe bends to her will. That’s always been the problem with working with her.” She stood up and followed after Engano. “The rest of us who know better have to clean up the mess.”

Ace shrugged. “We either follow them or we don’t.”

Ben cursed and started off after Engano and LeFay.

They weren’t even halfway across the courtyard when a Shapeless UEF fighter flew directly overhead. It looked as if it was just going to fly by when it stopped in mid-air. Instead of turning around, as any normal ship could and would do, the whole vessel morphed and transformed so that the front of it appeared where the back was, and vice-versa.

“Move!” screamed Ada, rushing the group toward the nearest wall along the edge of the courtyard that appeared to offer some cover. But it was a long way away.

Ace leaped out in front of the group like his ass was on fire. Amazing how fast he could move when he wanted to.

A moment later, the Shapeless UEF ship opened fire on the fleeing group. Unlike air-to-air rounds, the ground-facing fighter cannons shot slugs the size of grenades, with almost as much impact. Huge chunks of the street flew up and stung Ben’s legs. “We’re not gonna make it there,” he screamed ahead to Ada.

Ada didn’t slow. It was impossible to hear anything. It was all Ben could do just to shield his face and eyes from taking shrapnel, and everyone else was doing the same thing. The only thing working in their favor was the fact that fighter strafing, even with ground cannons, wasn’t ideal for hitting a dispersed group.

“Spread out!” Ben shrieked, and this time he must have really shouted, because even Ada turned around. “Don’t bunch up!”

Ada and Tomas nodded and split apart by several dozen yards. Ben stuck with his original trajectory, which took him further away from LeFay and Ace, but Engano stuck with him. Still, they were far less of a clear target now.

Sure enough, the strafing run soon stopped. Ben imagined the fighter was challenged to even make out its prey from its vantage point, let alone hit anyone, but he had no idea what the alien capabilities were. He imagined that even if they took the shape and capabilities of a typical fighter, they'd still retain whatever advantages they might naturally have.

If they had any. Something about that thought seemed important to him. Did the Shapeless have any abilities of their own, or did it all come from whatever they absorbed? Could that be a weakness?

His thoughts were interrupted by Ada pointing up and shouting.

“It's coming back!”

THIRTEEN

ACE TRIED POPPING off some rounds at the fighter, but they didn't connect. Even if they had, well, they wouldn't have had any real effect.

Ben's heart raced like a rodent when the kitchen lights turn on. He heard the unique screech of the fighter ship coming down for another strafing run. He was so caught up in trying to plan an escape for the group that he didn't see LeFay stop in her tracks, not at first.

"Don't be stupid, LeFay," Engano snapped.

Ben glanced at her, then followed her line of sight. He spotted LeFay standing calmly in the middle of the courtyard, facing back toward the incoming fighter.

With a steely resolve, she started to unbutton her shirt.

"What the hell are you doing, you weirdo?" Ace shouted.

LeFay ignored him. Once she had exposed the middle of her rib cage, she pressed down right in the center of her chest.

With a hiss, Ben realized that an airtight seal on LeFay's chest had been broken. A little compartment opened up. From inside, she took out a small sphere.

"Goddamn biohackers," Engano said under her breath. "Damn unholy tinkerers think they're hot shit. You're gonna get killed, LeFay."

"Better me than you, right, Heather?" LeFay answered.

"Obviously," Engano said. "But you still don't have to do this."

"What is she doing?" Ada said. She seemed to be the last to realize that something very strange was happening.

"Shit!" Ben snapped. "We can't just leave her out there to be torn to shreds by those fighters."

But Engano reached out and grabbed his arm firmly. "Let her work."

"But that's crazy," Ben started to say. "She can't—"

The fighter began firing at LeFay. She simply stood there as slugs smashed into the ground, getting closer and closer. Then, as if spurred by some unseen cue, LeFay reached back and launched the sphere at the fighter.

It wasn't just any toss. LeFay's arm was a blur. It made his own powerful artificial arm look like a joke. Ben realized that she had more strength in those biohacked arms than he'd imagined. *Note to self, don't get in a fist fight with LeFay.*

"You might want to move," said LeFay as she turned back to him.

Behind her, the sphere she'd tossed up at the fighter exploded in a most uncanny way. Instead of the fire and force from a traditional grenade, the sphere blew up in a cloud of incredibly bright sparks, connected by electrical arcs. As soon as one of those arcs hit the fighter, it stopped firing and looked to be heading straight into the ground.

A burst of air practically lifted LeFay off the ground, but she somehow managed to keep her feet as she strode away from the crash-landing Shapeless ship.

Ben stared in shock as it slid by. The ship convulsed and vibrated, making sounds as if it was alive. Before it came to a stop, the ship split in two and, in a seamless fluid motion, became two huge Shapeless creatures who immediately tried to attack.

Ben called out to the group, so they knew what was going on and didn't get caught from behind. Then he opened fire on the monsters. He heard the others behind him firing as well.

"This is stupid," Ace shouted.

He wasn't wrong. Bullets did nothing more than slow the Shapeless down. It was only a matter of time until they reached the group of survivors and cut and sliced through them, turning them into bloody meat ribbons.

"Nonsense, pretty boy," LeFay said. "I'll take the lead one."

"You'll take it?" Ace said. "What the hell does that mean?"

Moving faster than she had since Ben had met her, legs a blur that reminded him of her arms a moment earlier, LeFay ran straight at the closest Shapeless and grabbed it by one of its blade-like shoots.

The moment she touched it, sparks exploded from the contact. The Shapeless seemed to convulse, its body mutating over and over as its shape

contracted and expanded again and again. Through it all, LeFay wouldn't let go of the appendage she'd grasped in an iron grip. Ben could see the hairs on her head standing on end, crackling with energy.

A moment later, the Shapeless started to burn. Its chest blackened, and the convulsing increased for a moment, then stopped suddenly as it burst into flames.

The explosion finally threw LeFay backwards, and Ben realized she was still holding onto the limb; it had just been torn free when the Shapeless had erupted in flame. There was a scorched mark on the surface of the courtyard where the Shapeless had been reduced to a burning pile of matter.

"Oookay?" Ben stopped shooting and stared at LeFay. "How did you —"

"Look out!" Ada shouted, and super-heated bullets whizzed right past his face a moment before he saw an alien tendril swiping at his head. He ducked away, hoping he didn't turn right into the fire that someone was laying down behind him. The bullets threw the alien off enough that Ben was able to spin and leap away.

"Here ya go, big boy," LeFay shouted.

Ben saw that LeFay had her pistol-sized grenade launcher aimed at the Shapeless. She fired the grenade at the foot of the creature. The explosion tore a hole in the concrete courtyard, and sent the Shapeless flying.

LeFay rushed after it, reloading her launcher in the blink of an eye. She fired again, reloaded, fired again, reloaded. By the time she was standing over the Shapeless, she'd put no less than four rounds into its central mass.

The heat of the explosions was collectively having an effect. No single blast hurt it, but one after another did.

The blasts were hurting LeFay, too. Her clothes were scorched, as were her face and arms. But nothing like the Shapeless eating the brunt of the blasts, one after another. It started to convulse under the impacts; then it suddenly erupted in flame as well.

"One more for fun," LeFay said through gritted teeth as she fired one last grenade into the heart of the burning Shapeless. It screeched like an animal mortally wounded, then was torn to shreds under the final blast.

LeFay popped out the spent cartridge. Her face was bloody from a pair of shrapnel cuts. Her pants were ripped in several places, and somehow she'd lost part of the upper leather of one of her boots.

She spat on the remains of the Shapeless and turned around. “So... extreme heat in the form of high voltage and consecutive explosives. That’s the list so far,” she said.

No one said anything for a full second. Engano seemed like the only one that wasn’t fazed. “And extreme cold,” she said, “or so my sources tell me.”

“Oh, that too?” LeFay said, sounding like she was discussing a change in the weather.

Tomas cleared his throat. “I think you need to add yourself to that list.”

“No shit,” Ace agreed. “That was, like...” He seemed to cast around for words. “I don’t even know.”

“Eloquent as always,” LeFay said.

“What the hell *are* you?” Ben said, his voice hoarse from all the yelling.

“Customized,” LeFay said with a shrug; then she winked at Ben. “You oughta know.”

She turned to Engano. “So can we get to this damn bunker before we see more of these things, Director?”

“We’re here,” Engano said. She gestured not at the ascending the Senate Circle steps, but around the base of the steps and its nondescript walls.

Ben watched as Engano felt around the wall with her hand until she hit something. It was a secret button whose discovery was indicated by a loud click. A part of the wall slid away, revealing a short hallway and another thick steel door.

“Get in and hurry up,” Engano said. “Before another one of those things comes.”

Ben thought it was pretty pushy, coming from the person that had walked them right into the Shapeless to begin with, but Engano didn’t seem like the type to take constructive criticism. After LeFay brought up the rear, Engano closed the door again, and Ben had no doubt that the seal was once again practically impossible to see for anyone not looking for it.

Engano pounded on the inner steel door as the entrance to the secret passageway closed up behind the group, making it pitch black in here. No one answered, so she pounded again. Finally a small opening in the steel door slid open, providing the only light, partially obstructed by a young man’s head.

“Identify yourself!” ordered the young man. Ben couldn’t make out the uniform from where he was, but it was clearly an AIC soldier of some rank.

“AIC Intelligence Director Engano.”

The man hesitated. “How do I know that?”

Engano sighed. “What happened to the retina scanner?”

“It’s down,” the soldier said.

“So what was your plan, then?”

“Ma’am?”

“To authenticate,” Engano said, the impatience in her voice clear. “Since you don’t know that you can trust the name I’m giving you, what was your plan to authenticate? Or were you just going to rely on your expert senses to know when someone was lying to you or not?”

“Uh no, ma’am,” he said. Then he paused. “Well, I guess, yes, ma’am.”

Engano sighed. “Surrounded by idiots.”

“Ma’am?”

“I’m going to have you securing Mongovian grub worms on an automated transport to the end of the galaxy in about five seconds if you don’t open this door, Private,” Engano said. “And I’m going to personally ensure that you’re castrated and your testicles fed to them before you leave.”

There was a short pause, followed by the loud, clear sound of disengaging locks. Finally, the door opened.

FOURTEEN

THE LAST THING Clarissa Moreno remembered clearly was the fast-approaching reflecting pool she was going to crash-land the *Lost* in to. That was it. Everything from there was just disconnected parts of vague events happening around her.

Clarissa remembered small glimpses of fighting. There was a ground battle on Vassar-1. She couldn't recall if the group was involved, but she remembered being carried through the chaos by Ben. It was hard to forget that unique feeling of being held by a human and a metallic robot arm.

As far as Clarissa could tell, the group had made it to safety. Where was she now? She was on a surgery table. She knew the woman standing above her.

LeFay.

Had things become so desperate she'd had to turn to LeFay? God, she hated that woman.

Then there was a loud bang, followed by gunshots. Clarissa couldn't seem to sit up. She stared up at the surgery lights as they were turned off, and she waited and listened, slipping in and out of consciousness.

Clarissa woke up, for good this time. When she looked around, it took her a little bit to put together where she was. There were a woman and man in the same small, confined space. Both were bald, both had blood on their faces, both were—as she easily put together—cultists.

“WHY THIS ONE? What good is she? Just looks like more broken meat to me,” said Vesta. Her hands rested on the butt of her gun, which balanced on what was a black transport’s floor.

“That broken meat will lead us to the son of Saito. The Pale Man wants him, so we’ll use her to lure him to us,” answered Ducar.

“I get that, but why? What’s so special about all of them? The Pale Man, I don’t doubt his plans. Don’t get me wrong. I would never question the holy one, but he pretty much already owns this city. What do we need with the son of some UEF captain?”

“It’s not our place to question him, Vesta. Our place lies in service. Remember that.” Ducar pointed to his head. “And remember they’re listening.”

“Oh, believe me, I remember. I’ll never forget when they put that damn thing in,” Vesta said, a grimace crossing her features.

“Stop your bitching. If it wasn’t for them and what they did to--*for* us—we’d just be more of these pathetic worker bees. Fighting the inevitable. Better to be the red right hand of the devil than in his path.”

“I think she’s awake.” Vesta looked over at the woman, whose uniform said *Morgan*. Vesta made eye contact with her, and enjoyed the frightened look on her face. She blinked, allowing her black, inky eyeballs to unsettle the woman further.

“Well...put her back to sleep. Don’t want to drag a wiggler back to base.”

Vesta smiled as the woman managed to rock her body as she tried to resist her approach with an auto-injector. She finally got her arms moving, but they were weak and uncoordinated. She pushed and slapped pathetically to avoid the needle, but Vesta pressed her knee down on the woman’s stomach wound and enjoyed the sound of her squealing in pain.

“Vesta,” Ducar said.

She sighed and injected the woman. She was out cold in seconds.

“SHE’S HEAVIER THAN SHE LOOKS.”

Clarissa heard Vesta’s voice as she regained consciousness. That was followed by stabbing pains in her side and stomach. She awakened to the

pain of her wound and the agony of having to listen to the bald cultist woman.

At least she'd caught the woman's name before she'd been injected.

When Clarissa opened her eyes, she saw that she was crossing a street. One of her arms was around Vesta's shoulders as the small but strong woman dragged her along. Looking down, Clarissa saw her feet half-walking, half-dragging across the asphalt. There was debris, broken glass, and a little blood on the ground.

Clarissa looked back and saw an all-black transport ship. She figured it must've been what she was brought in. Brought to wherever the hell she was. Six or seven more of the bald bastards stood guard as smoke-engulfed buildings behind them still smoldered.

"Where are...where are you taking me?" asked Clarissa, groggy. Her mouth was so dry. She'd drink sewage water at that point, just for the hydration.

"Just hurry up. Need I remind you we're on the clock, on a timetable here?" said the man.

Clarissa turned her head forwards and saw him walking just in front.

"Maybe if you helped me, we can go a little faster," Vesta said.

The man turned back and raised an eyebrow, but didn't slow. "Complaints will get you nowhere. Just hang on. We're almost inside. Remember, we need her to join us if this is gonna work."

Join them?

Moments later, Clarissa entered a large concrete structure. She read the holographic sign that flickered above the entrance. It read: "City Sentinel Precinct 5".

Why the hell are they taking me to a police station?

"Home sweet home," the man said, opening the glass-fronted doors of the bombed-out precinct. Shards of broken glass ground against each other as he opened it up.

Vesta sighed. Then she readjusted her hold on Clarissa. "Never thought I'd be back here."

Clarissa was too sickened by the stench to pay much attention to what her captors were saying. The police station, like the sanctuary station before it, was filled to the brim with death.

Dead city sentinel officers littered the ground. There was so much blood splattered on the walls, it was hard to tell what the original color was

underneath. From what she could see, some of the bodies had been shot. Others looked to have been run over by razor-blade-lined lawn mowers, and the amount of gore on the floor was staggering. It was so bad that everyone's shoes and boots threatened to slip and slide.

"Come on. Back here to the chief's office," the man said. Clarissa watched as he waved Vesta forward.

"Smells terrible in here, Ducar," said Vesta.

Ducar. Now we all have names.

"Yeah, well, a station full of dead pigs doesn't smell great. What can you do?"

Clarissa was more disturbed by the living things in the precinct than the dead. There were sentinel officers milling around, but not really. She could tell they weren't quite human.

One of the cops kept mashing his face, while looking at a dead officer on the floor under him. From what Clarissa could tell, he was trying to match the visage. In practice, it was an unsettling sight of all his facial features being manipulated and morphed like wet clay.

Clarissa witnessed another officer, a woman, with her hand inside the throat of a dead cop who looked just like her. Then the living one tried to speak in a horribly twisted, unnatural voice, like it was trying to mimic a real one with no context of what humans actually sounded like.

Clarissa even saw an undulating pile of meat and bone transform into the shape of a human being, though it didn't have any details or distinguishable features yet. It was just a human-shaped mass of flesh, and that confirmed it. She was surrounded by the Shapeless.

"Here we are, sir, just as you requested," Ducar said as he entered the City Sentinel chief's office.

Standing with his back to them behind the desk was a skinny bald man with a pale complexion and sharp cheekbones.

"The woman known as 'Morgan', Ben Saito's pilot," Vesta said, following Ducar in and dropping Clarissa on one of the chairs at the opposite end of the desk from the Pale Man.

"Wonderful," the man said. His voice was so deep that Clarissa thought she felt it reverberating in her own chest.

The Pale Man turned around. At first glance he might've looked human, but his complete lack of body hair, including his eyebrows and his obsidian eyes, made it clear he—it—was something else.

“Ducar, Vesta, you will be rewarded. Now, please leave us. We have much to talk about.”

FIFTEEN

“I’M glad to see you, Madam Director,” said the young private who’d been on the other side of the bunker door.

Ada couldn’t help but wonder if that was the response that Engano was expecting after threatening the private’s, well, privates.

If Engano was surprised, she didn’t show it. “Who’s in charge down here?”

“I’ll take you there right away, Madam Director,” the private said. He turned and started down the hallway. Engano didn’t follow. After a dozen feet, the private stopped and turned back around. “Ma’am?”

Engano sighed. “Who’s going to watch the door, Private, while you take us on a grand tour?”

The private looked confused for a moment; then her words seemed to slowly sink in. “Oh, right. Yeah, I see what you mean.”

Engano looked like she might implode on the spot. “Private, do you have, I don’t know, maybe a radio or something that you could use to call for someone to come get us?”

“Nothing like that is working,” the private said, grimacing. “But it’s fine, ma’am. We aren’t expecting anyone else. You were the only one that I was told to watch for.”

LeFay crossed her arms. “You didn’t believe it was her when we got to the door, but she was the only one you were told to expect?”

The private looked confused again. “Yes?”

Engano balled her fists. Ada could see the whites of her knuckles, and decided to step in. She didn’t care for Engano, but she didn’t need a dead private in this dank hallway, either. “Since we’re who you were waiting for,

it's probably fine to leave the door for the moment to show us into the bunker," she said for Engano's benefit.

"Fine," Engano said at last. "Lead the way, mighty defender of the fortress, Private... what's your name?"

"Greyston, ma'am." He saluted. "Mitchell Greyston."

"Don't salute me, Private. I'm a civilian."

"Oh." Greyston just stood there.

"How about we get moving, Greyston?" Ada suggested.

"Yes," he said, and turned around.

After a last exasperated glance around, Engano followed him. Ada and the rest fell in behind.

Greyston led them down a long, winding hallway that led downwards. At one point, he turned to the group. "Glad to see you guys. All of you. We need all the bodies we can get."

"For what?" Ada asked. She noticed the air down in the bunker wasn't stale. She felt a slight breeze, and wondered where it might be coming from.

"For our counterattack, of course," Greyston said. "There's no way we're letting those imperialist bastards destroy our capital without paying for it."

"You do know what you're up against out there, right?" Ace said incredulously. "There's no counterattacking that."

"I know." Greyston's enthusiasm waned a bit. "We all know that. But still, we can't just let them get away with this unscathed. We need to show them... something."

Ada was pretty sure the private hadn't even been born yet when the war started. "I understand, Greyston. But those are ... powerful forces out there." Engano gave Ada a glance that told her not to say too much. "What do we have to fight back with? Rifles? Charges?"

Greyston smiled. "You'll see. We're almost there."

When the group turned one final corner, a large cavern-like room was revealed. In it were rows of AIC fighters, and a surprising amount of military personnel running around prepping the ships, arming themselves and the vessels.

"I'll be damned," Ace said, looking around slack-jawed.

"Hate to break it to you," Ada said under her breath to Ace. "But all of them *are* damned if they think they can attack those Shapeless

dreadnoughts.”

Ada knew she should’ve been happy to see so many survivors already organizing a counterstrike. Their fighting spirit should’ve galvanized her. But she couldn’t shake the image of Francesca’s face from her thoughts. How many more like her were down here? All of them, probably. Every last one of them.

“So who’s in charge here, Greyston?” Engano asked again.

“He’s right over here.”

“Let’s go,” Engano said. “You too, Saito.”

“Me?” Ben asked. “What do you need me for?”

“Just get over here,” she said; then she turned and waved on Greyston to continue leading to meet the officer in charge.

Ben looked back at Ada, who shrugged. She had a feeling that Engano wanted Ben around as a bargaining chip. The son of Lee Saito meant nobody was leaving her out of the loop. At least, based on how calculating Engano had been so far, that’s what she assumed. Ada found it exhausting to look at the world as a constant game of one-upmanship, but that seemed to be Engano’s only view.

“Somebody needs to keep an eye on her,” Ada offered.

Ben frowned. “I do *not* volunteer,” he said, but then he turned to follow Engano anyway.

“Left behind again,” Ace said. “As usual.”

“Good,” Ada said, scanning the room. “Underestimated is a good thing. See if you spot a ship or something so we can get outta here the first chance we get.”

“I like your optimism,” Ace said. “You think we can just walk around here, eying up ships like this is a big shopping mall?”

“And guns,” Ada said.

“Somebody’s going to stop us,” Ace said.

“With that attitude, yeah.”

“What are you—”

“Ace!” Ada snapped. “Nobody knows us here. If you look like you belong, nobody’s going to stop you. Take Tomas. At least he looks the part.”

Ace glanced over at Tomas. “What about it? Want to go look for big toys?”

“I thought you’d never ask,” Tomas said.

He turned toward the ships lined along the far wall of the hangar, easily slipping in between two groups of officers and disappearing. Ace awkwardly followed after, looking like the kid who just raided the cookie jar.

“I give ‘em five minutes, tops, before somebody stops them,” LeFay said.

“I’ll take that,” Ada replied.

“I think I might make a little exit myself,” LeFay said.

Ada frowned at her. She might have Ace and Tomas looking for insurance equipment, but she wasn’t contemplating leaving the bunker anytime soon. This looked a helluva lot safer than anywhere else they’d been on Vassar-1. “Where are you going?”

“To find Agent Moreno,” LeFay said. “I still owe her.”

“You saved her life, yeah?” Ada said. “What kind of debt isn’t paid back by that?”

“If we both live to see each other again, I’ll tell you. For now, look after your group.”

Ada snorted. “I haven’t been doing too great a job so far.”

“It’s a damn alien invasion,” LeFay said. “You’re not dead. You’re doing great.” She punched Ada on the shoulder hard enough that Ada knew it would bruise. “It’s Benny-boy’s job to blame himself for stuff nobody asked him to worry about. You’re too smart for that self-pity shit. I think you know who you need to worry about here.”

“Engano.”

“Bingo,” LeFay said. She pulled a nicotine cartridge from her shoulder pocket and popped it in her mouth as she walked away. When she reached the hallway that led back to the bunker entrance, she paused and turned around. “Don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

SIXTEEN

“WHAT ARE YOUR CAPABILITIES, GREYSTON?” Engano asked as they headed across the hangar.

“I’ve had some basic flight training, but I’m probably not much use in a real dogfight. But I aced my sharpshooter—”

“In the *facility*, Greyston,” Engano said, feeling the huge vein in her forehead throbbing. “Why would I care about your personal capabilities?”

“Ah,” he said, followed by silence as he furrowed his brows and seemed to contemplate if Engano would ever actually care about his personal capabilities.

Engano glanced around, genuinely wondering if anyone would care if she killed him. She could just reach out and strangle him. It would be so easy. She pictured the stupid oaf, tongue dangling out as he lay on the ground, neck snapped, shitting himself. She smiled at that image in her mind.

Greyston smiled along with Engano. “That makes sense,” he said at last.

Before she could fully express how little sense Private Greyston made in the greater scheme of the universe, Ben spoke up. “This place is huge,” he said, looking around the hidden hangar.

“It should be,” Engano said. “We spent a trillion credits on it once upon a time.”

“I’ve never seen some of this equipment,” Ben said.

“We don’t like to overshare with the UEF,” Engano said. “So I’m not surprised.”

“I know your equipment pretty well,” he said. “I studied AIC tactical equipment extensively.”

“Good for you,” Engano said. “But I’m sure you studied current tech. Nothing in here is less than fifty years old.”

Ben shook his head. “Fifty years old?”

“If not older,” Greyston said. “This was all built long before the Great War.”

“Are you sure the Shapeless don’t know about this place?” Ben said to her.

“No,” Engano said bluntly. “That’s why we need to hurry.”

“The Shapeless?” asked Greyston.

Engano waved his question away. She had enough of a headache already without trying to educate Greyston on that topic. “What about those capabilities, Greyston?” she asked. “The *facility* capabilities,” she reiterated.

“Hard to say for sure, ma’am,” Greyston said. He was walking double-time just to keep up with her, even though he was ostensibly leading the way. “We got about forty fighters in the short hangar. Mark-10s.”

Ben coughed. “Mark-10s? As in Mark-10s?” He pantomimed a fighter stick bucking in both hands.

Considering it was a miracle Engano had Greyston on topic, she didn’t really need Ben interrupting every second. “Beggars and choosers and all that,” she said.

“I suppose,” Ben said, shaking his head.

If Greyston understood the back and forth, his eyes didn’t show it. He continued as if there hadn’t been an interruption. “A little older, sure, but still flightworthy. Well, mostly. Hence the need for all this maintenance. These old buckets of bolts need a little loving before they’re ready. Then we have two troop transports. A general’s cruiser—”

“A general’s cruiser?” Engano asked. “In here?”

They were quite large, maybe half the size of a dreadnought. She hadn’t expected one here. It could be useful.

“Not a full-sized one,” Greyston said. “It’s a little bit bigger than a raider-class ship, meant to look like a luxury liner. It was meant to transport VIPs undetected in case of something, well, like what’s going on here.”

As they walked, Engano realized something important. All the AIC ships were being loaded with traditional weaponry. They had on board cannons, missiles, and bombs: all of which would be effective against UEF

ships, yes. Maybe they'd work against the Shapeless versions as well. But against the aliens themselves, they were almost useless.

She glanced at Ben. "If you had to choose one weapon against the Shapeless, what have you seen work best so far?"

"Fire," Ben said without hesitation. "Cold works, but it's hard to generate. Electricity and explosives seem to work on the basis that they both generate enough heat to hurt them. I've personally seen even fully-transformed Shapeless lose their form with heat applied."

Engano didn't know exactly what he meant by 'fully-transformed,' but she could make a guess. She turned back to Greyston. "Do you have incendiary weapons?"

"Pardon, ma'am?"

"What part of that didn't you understand, Greyston?"

"Uh, well, I mean, sure. We have firebombs, I think. But I'm not sure —"

Greyston stopped talking when he realized that Engano had stopped. "Madam Director?"

"Are those hell-gel bombs?" She was pointing at a long line of racked bombs with red stars lining both sides.

"Yes," Greyston said. "We haven't had much use for them since the war conventions outlawed them."

She turned to Ben. "Well?"

The hell-gel bombs had been gruesome back in their day. That the colonies had actually used them against each other in interplanetary wars was a sad footnote in expansion history that everyone wanted to forget.

The gel bombs were an organic-compound-based, liquefied weapon designed to slow combustion and release energy over a longer time than any of the standard explosive weapons that had been in use at the time. The hell gel adhered to surfaces and resisted suppression. It was a gruesome way to literally melt your enemies away where they stood, and the ferociously unpredictable delivery system made them all the more dangerous.

"That would be great if we were trying to bomb them," Ben said.

"Delivery systems can be altered, Mr. Saito," Engano said.

"Um," Greyston interrupted. "He's just there," he said, pointing at the front of an office at the opposite end of the hangar. "If you want to stay here, I'll let him know you're here."

“You do that, Greyston,” Engano said, trying and failing to mask the sarcasm in her voice. Greyston seemed oblivious, but then again, that was his default setting.

Engano and Ben patiently waited. They were quiet at first, but then the Intelligence director broke the silence.

“You look just like him, you know. I mean, I haven’t seen him since we were both much younger, but...you really are his spitting image.”

“You knew my father?” Ben asked her.

She nodded, but before she could say more, Greyston came back. “He’s ready to see you.”

“How wonderful,” Engano murmured.

When she opened the office door a moment later, she wasn’t surprised at who she found there.

SEVENTEEN

“I SHOULD HAVE KNOWN nothing would kill you, Senator,” Engano said. “You old cockroach, you.”

“I could say the same of you, Madam Director. How’d you happen to find yourself here? I heard your team died out in the Bowery.”

“No such luck, LeFleur.”

Engano glanced at Ben, and saw how the last name hit him like a slap. She’d been well briefed on his interactions with the *Perseverance*.

“And who might this poor soul you managed to rope along with you be?” asked LeFleur. He held out his hand for Ben to shake.

“This is Ben,” Engano said. “Ben Saito.”

Some of the color seemed to bleed out of the Senator’s face. “Ben... Saito?” LeFleur held Ben’s hand awkwardly. “Son of Lee Saito, that Ben Saito?”

“That’s the one,” Ben said quietly.

“I believe you knew my daughter,” LeFleur said at last as he released Ben’s hand.

Engano could feel Ben squirming, and decided to let him off the hook for the moment. She needed that conversation to happen, but not just yet.

“That’s nice,” Engano said coldly. “Now, Senator, what’s the plan here?”

LeFleur considered her coldly in return. “The plan? It’s simple. Since I escaped that damn convoy and made my way back here, we’ve been arming and preparing for a counterstrike.”

“You don’t have enough ships or manpower to down any of the dreadnoughts.”

LeFleur nodded. “Bad odds, no doubt. But our people, the citizens of Vassar-1 and the AIC in general, need an example to rally around.”

“So your plan is to martyr yourself?” Engano asked. “Allow me to not sound impressed.”

“If that’s the way you want to put it. But I prefer the idea that we’re not going down without putting up a proper fight.”

“A proper fight,” Engano scoffed. “This isn’t a gentleman’s duel, Harrison,” she said. “Besides, I watched the proper fight. It ended with our home fleet falling back to the dirt like so much burning scrap metal.”

“We couldn’t properly coordinate—”

“They did little to no damage and ended up dead. Do you feel invigorated, galvanized by their sacrifice? No? Do you know why? Because it was pointless.”

“Pointless?” Senator LeFleur asked, his voice rising with rage. He stood and came around his desk.

For a moment, Engano thought he was going to take a swing at her. It wouldn’t be the first time someone had tried it. Not many people tried a second time.

“Look out there.” LeFleur pointed at the windows of his office, which looked out on the subterranean docking bay. “All of them, every single last one has lost people today. They’ve lost their homes, loved ones, entire lives. What am I supposed to tell them? That we’re going to turn tail and run? That we’re gonna hide until the danger passes? No. I can’t do that.”

“It’s still suicide, Harrison,” Engano said. “It’s a terrible idea.”

“Don’t talk to me about suicide,” he shouted. “If your people hadn’t failed us, *Madam Director*, this wouldn’t have happened.”

“But we did fail!” Engano said, slamming her fist down on the table. She took a long, deep breath. “We did fail. *I* failed. I failed to understand the nature of the threat. I failed to understand the best way to counter it. That first-wave attack was pointless for that reason, and wasteful.”

LeFleur cocked his head as he slowly walked back behind his desk. “What’s gotten into you, Heather? You’re not one to admit failure, at least not in so many words. You’re too politically savvy for that.”

Engano snorted derisively. “May I never be so savvy again.”

“So what is it you’re proposing, *Madam Director*, if I may be so direct? You say our plan is suicide. What’s yours?”

“Two questions,” Engano said by way of answer. “One, you have working tech down here. Does that mean you have communications? Maybe the ability to send a message off-world?”

LeFleur shook his head. “Network is down even if we could penetrate whatever jamming they seem to have. We could try and slip a data probe past them, but that won’t get us help for weeks.”

Engano had expected as much. “Second question. Can we use the planetary weapon?”

LeFleur looked genuinely shocked. “Within our own atmosphere? That’s impossible.”

“Have you looked into it or not?”

LeFleur locked his jaw. “Yes. The weapon is locked into a single target, and you know what it is.”

“Earth.”

“If we could get their ship over it *and* if they were high enough in the atmosphere that the weapon could actually coalesce into a tight enough beam to damage them, we might be able to use it against them.”

“All righty, so we’ll put that one in our back pocket,” she said.

LeFleur cocked his head. “You seem awfully chipper for a person contemplating the end of our world.”

“Don’t be dramatic, Harrison,” Engano said. She rose to her feet. “You have your talk with junior here. I need to go chat with your engineers. Time is working against us.”

Ben looked like he might choke.

“Just tell him the truth,” Engano said. “He deserves that much.”

EIGHTEEN

LEFLEUR TOOK a couple of glasses out from one of his desk drawers as soon as Engano was gone. "Please, sit down."

Ben took a seat, then took a moment to really take in the office. It was quite old-fashioned. It looked like something he might've seen in a museum fashioned after the twenty-first century.

"Do you know what I want to talk to you about?" LeFleur produced a bottle of whiskey and opened it. "Before you answer, I know that you're former UEF. Part of me wonders if you still are. Perhaps you're a spy, like the Director out there? Maybe you work for her?"

"Like a double agent?" Ben stifled a laugh as he said it. He chalked it up to nerves. He could face down enemy ships, shapeshifting aliens, and gun-toting terrorists, but a father grieving for a daughter that he'd had a hand in leading into a trap? That was something else altogether.

"Something like that," LeFleur said, pouring whiskey into one of the glasses slowly, deliberately. "Yes."

"No, I assure you I'm not a double agent."

"That so?" LeFleur poured the second glass of whiskey. "Then how is it that you and your crew escaped my daughter? You do know my daughter, correct? Captain LeFleur and her ship, the *Perseverance*?"

"I did meet her," Ben said. "She captured us."

"Where?"

"I don't know the exact coordinates off the top of my head, but we were where the *Atlas* came out of their fold jump."

"Drink? Looks like you need it." LeFleur was calm. He picked up one of the glasses of whiskey and offered it to Ben.

Ben, for the first time since surviving the crash of the *Lost*, glanced down at his clothes. He was covered in dirt, gun grease, and Clarissa's blood. His hands weren't much better. He could only imagine what his face looked like.

"Yeah, maybe more than one. Thanks." Ben took the whiskey and took a sip. It was a pleasant burn in his mouth and down his parched throat.

"So." LeFleur poured another. "Why were you out there? Looking for the *Atlas*?"

"Looking for my father. I...I had a hunch that he might be in trouble, that his ship and crew were flying into an ambush." Suddenly Ben could picture the small hyperdrive. He still had it. Even with all the commotion and chaos, he'd managed to hang onto it.

"I see. I don't need to know why you had that 'hunch,' but I need to know what happened when my daughter's ship came upon you," LeFleur said.

"Well, we tried to run."

"And?"

"And she caught us," Ben said honestly.

LeFleur took a sip of his whiskey. "What did you tell her about your purpose out there?"

"Same thing I just told you."

"And?"

"She locked us up in the *Perseverance*'s brig, which was fine. I would've done the same thing in her position, really. Anyway, she locked us up for a little while. Then she realized she needed some help finding the *Atlas*. So..."

LeFleur handed Ben his refilled glass of whiskey. "So you helped her?"

"I offered to." Ben downed his drink. "But I lied. I told her there was a way to track the fold signature, but I sent her the wrong way while we actually went the right way." He shrugged. There was no reason to lie about it.

"But she wasn't stupid enough to just let you go free."

"No, she wasn't. I was stupid enough to think she was. Anyway, we ended up just outside this sanctuary station near the edges of your space. Sanctuary Station-33. The *Perseverance* jumped right after us, arrived minutes later. She must have put a tracker aboard. But waiting for them..." Ben downed his whiskey and pushed it back over to LeFleur.

“Who was waiting for them? The *Atlas*? Pirates? What?” LeFleur’s calm demeanor changed.

“I—you need to keep an open mind, because I’m telling you the truth. And it’s important, because you’re dealing with the same thing now, up there,” Ben said. He took his refilled glass and downed it, his third, in one gulp. He couldn’t believe what he was about to say.

“Go on.”

“Out there, the ships attacking you aren’t UEF. They aren’t UEF at all. Furthest thing from it, honestly.”

“If they aren’t UEF, then who are they?” LeFleur asked.

“They’re aliens.”

“Aliens?” Senator LeFleur fought back tears and anger. “Let me get this straight. You’re claiming that ‘aliens’ not only took out the most advanced dreadnought of all time, but they took out my daughter’s as well. And now they’ve come here to Vassar-1?”

Ben shook his head. “It’s the same aliens the Oblivion cult prays to and worships. Their ‘saviors’ are homicidal shapeshifting aliens.”

LeFleur shook his head and put his glass down hard on the desk. “I just wanted an honest explanation.”

“You’re getting it,” Ben insisted. “These aliens are the same ones who ambushed the *Atlas*, the same ones that killed my parents, and the same ones that killed your daughter.” He couldn’t read LeFleur’s reaction, but he stumbled on. “I honestly have no idea why they’re here on Vassar-1. And I know this is all hard to believe—”

“*Hard* isn’t the word, son. How about *impossible*?” LeFleur’s eyes were brimming with tears, but Ben knew tears of rage when he saw them. He hoped in this moment that the senator didn’t have a weapon somewhere down in those drawers where he kept the whiskey.

“Definitely not impossible, Senator,” Ben said, “because it’s the truth. Ask any of my crew. Hell, ask Engano. This is the horrible reality of what’s going on right now, and I’m sorry about your daughter. Truly, I am. From the brief time I met and knew her, she seemed like a smart, capable captain.”

LeFleur was silent for a moment. He closed his eyes and wiped the tears away. “Okay,” he said at last. He sniffled and poured himself another glass of whiskey, all the way up to the brim. He drank the whole thing in one go.

“Let’s say I believe you. What information can you give me on these aliens pretending to be the UEF and attacking us?”

Ben sighed. “I honestly don’t know. Those things are hard as hell to kill. Bullets don’t do anything. Explosives can work, if they’re caught in the middle of one big one or multiple small ones.”

“Their biggest weakness seems to be extreme temperatures,” Engano said from the doorway.

“Oh good, you’re back,” LeFleur said with little conviction.

“I talked with your engineers,” Engano said. “They think we can move some of the hell-gel bombs into missile canisters, but not many. Which is good, because we really don’t have time to retrofit all the birds out there. We’ll have to decide if we want to give a few birds most of the hell-gel missiles, or if we spread them out thinly.”

“What are you talking about?” LeFleur asked, looking completely confused.

“I’m talking about killing aliens.”

“You actually believe this nonsense?” LeFleur said incredulously.

“What he’s telling you is the truth,” Engano said. “I’ve seen it with my own two eyes. Plus my intel has been telling me this for months, and frankly, I trust it more than my own two eyes.”

LeFleur opened his palms wide. “Why didn’t you just tell me?”

“I didn’t think you’d believe me.” She nodded at Ben. “Now you might.”

LeFleur closed his eyes and rested his chin on his fingertips. “So what exactly are you suggesting?”

“Something that will only make sense if you’re ready to accept the impossible.”

NINETEEN

CLARISSA FOUND herself in her childhood home on the outskirts of Vassar-1. It was more of a farm than a home, and at twelve years old, Clarissa had taken to calling it “the plantation,” a term of derision that had infuriated her father.

At first, Clarissa thought she was dreaming. She was, after all, back in her twelve-year-old body—and yet she understood that she wasn’t. But everything felt too real to be a dream. She could smell the unique aroma of the farming machines cutting her family’s grain, cultivating it, harvesting it. And she could feel the hot, unfiltered sun on her neck. It never quite felt the same as it did in the central city of Vassar-1.

Clarissa was sitting atop one of the old abandoned harvester machines on the back side of the farm. It was inoperable, but one of her favorite places to hang out. She liked that it allowed her to see almost the whole of her family’s land, at least in that sector.

Clarissa’s family, the Morenos, was one of the wealthiest on Vassar-1. Their wealth didn’t come from working in financial fields, universal trade, or corruption. It came from good old-fashioned farming. Agriculture, once a dying trade on Earth, boomed with the colonies, and her ancestors were among the first to make a go on the dusty sun-bleached planet that would eventually become the AIC capital.

“Hey, how’s it going, kid?”

Clarissa didn’t recognize the deep voice, and turned around with a start. Sitting next to her on the harvester machine, where she swore he hadn’t been a moment before, was a man dressed in what she recognized as a UEF officer’s uniform. From all the medals, stars, and bars, he was clearly

someone important. He had a mustache, perfectly groomed salt-and-pepper hair, and the most unnervingly obsidian-black eyes.

“I know you. Don’t I?” asked Clarissa.

“Do you? How?”

“I’m not...” Clarissa tried to remember for a moment where she’d seen him before. Then it came to her. “From my mission files. You’re Ben’s father, the commander of the *Atlas*.”

“Well done,” he said. “Do you know my name?”

“Captain Lee Saito.”

The uniformed man’s eyes changed from obsidian black to a normal human brown. “Among other names, yes. I’m Saito.” He looked out at the vast fields of grain. “Where, pray tell, are we?”

“I think...it’s a memory.”

“But where?”

“My family’s farm. One of my family’s farms. Excuse me, but why the hell are we here?”

Saito smiled. “That’s what we’re trying to figure out. Together.”

IN THE SHAPELESS’ *Atlas* dreadnought above Vassar-1, the false Saito stood by a giant viewing window, looking out at the destruction happening below. This phase of his plan was already almost over. Next came the hard part.

Killing the local populace was easy. With the weapons on the dreadnought recreations of the *Atlas*, combined with the Shapeless’ inherent abilities, dealing with human resistance, especially in a surprise attack, was child’s play.

What Saito wanted, however, was what was hidden somewhere down there. To get that, he needed to dive in and sort through Clarissa’s memories, hoping that her enhanced role gave her access to secrets denied to her compatriots.

Saito walked away from the window towards the center of the room on the Shapeless’ flagship. There on the ground, still unconscious, was the real Lee Saito. Strapped down to the floor next to him, with a tendril latched onto her head, was Clarissa.

“YOU FOUGHT IN THE WAR?” asked Saito. It was a rhetorical question. He sat behind Clarissa in the cockpit as she flew an AIC fighter above the never-ending battlefield that was Europa.

“I did. Two tours.” Clarissa paused and flipped open her comms. “Falcon Five to Hawk One. This is Falcon Five to Hawk One.”

None of her fighter groups were responding. She prayed that they were still alive, because the AIC, as they often had in her lifetime, was losing the air battle to their better-equipped and more advanced UEF counterparts.

Clarissa weaved and dodged through anti-air fire as AIC troops advanced below. They were doomed. Every poor soul down there, she knew they were dead.

“Shit!” Clarissa yelled out as a super-heated high-velocity fighter ship’s round scraped her wing, inches from the cockpit glass. It was a close one. Far too close for comfort.

“This is not what we need,” said Saito from the backseat.

“What do you mean, what we need?” asked Clarissa.

Suddenly she found herself in a bar on Vassar-1. It was called the Flight Club, and was usually reserved for AIC pilots. She was nearing the end of her second tour, and after what she’d been through, what she’d lost, she needed a drink.

“Mind if I sit here?” Clarissa didn’t look up from her glass of Scotch even though she heard a man’s voice addressing her. She didn’t answer.

“I just need a damn drink.” The man sat down next to Clarissa. “Let me get...what do I want? Just a double of tequila, straight.”

“Double straight, you got it, boss,” Saito said. He was behind the bar. As he poured the stranger’s drink, he asked Clarissa: “What are we doing here? Why is this memory so important?”

“It’s when I met my husband for the first time,” answered Clarissa. The fact just tumbled out of her mind, fully formed. She looked up from her glass over at the man. He was tall and handsome, just the way she liked them. Then she looked at Saito. “You know what, gimme what he’s having.”

“But ma’am, you haven’t finished your—”

“Just give the pretty lady her drink, will ya, Ted? It’s on me,” the man interrupted.

“The lady can cover her own drink,” Clarissa said.

“Well, sure, you *could*. But I know that look on your face. You need somebody to buy you a drink,” he said.

“Oh, do I?” Clarissa asked.

“Been there before. I just trained a class full of fools who, if they’re lucky, will be in this bar in a year or two with that same face. And if they don’t use their heads, they’ll end up dead, floating in the middle of space or never buried on some strange planet. Sorry. Didn’t mean to get so morose on ya.”

“Nothing to be sorry about. Never anything to be sorry about when you come back alive, right?”

Saito served the man and Clarissa their drinks. Both of them thanked him. The man held up his glass for a toast, and Clarissa did the same.

“To the fallen,” said the man.

“And the brave,” Clarissa said. She’d done the old toast enough in her time to repeat it without thinking. They clicked their glasses together, and both downed them.

“My name is Blake,” he said. “Blake Ferston.”

“Clarissa Moreno.” Clarissa smiled as she shook her future husband’s hand.

In a jarring transition, Clarissa lived a brief glimpse of her giving birth to their twins, Sara and Mara. Blake was there, holding her hand. She wished she could’ve stayed there longer, before being thrown to the next memory.

“Now this, this is more what we’re looking for,” Saito said.

She was at Black Palace, the infamous AIC spook training grounds. Some of her best, and worst, memories were from the short, intense time she’d spent here.

Clarissa sat on a hardwood floor, legs crossed. Dressed in sweats, she was one of about fifteen fellow classmates. They watched intently as their teacher, Heather Engano, sparred with a student. She was trying to teach them how to engage armed enemy combatants at close range.

Engano quickly and ruthlessly elbowed the student she was sparring with in the face, breaking his nose. Blood spilled out over the mats they fought on. As if it was second nature, because in many ways it was, she then grabbed the hapless student by his arm and flipped him down onto his back.

“So...what did we learn?” asked Engano.

Clarissa raised her hand.

“Speak, Trainee Moreno,” Engano said.

“Expect the unexpected. Always be ready to improvise,” answered Clarissa.

Clarissa knew what came next. It was why she’d answered, after all. It was why she always answered.

“Come prove those are more than words,” Engano said.

Clarissa stood up. She made her way through her sitting fellow trainees and stepped up to the mats as the previous victim was dragged away.

“You were a bit, what do they call it? Feisty?” Saito paced back and forth on the opposite side of the mats. “Why this memory? Let’s let it play out and see.”

“Look at you,” Engano said. “So brave. You see, class, we have a soldier here. Sorry, a pilot. Unlike the rest of you, she didn’t go to the Academy; she didn’t labor through the evaluations. She has a family, friends, a life outside of this beautiful Black Palace. Does that make you jealous?”

“Look at you,” Clarissa said. “So nervous you need to turn the class against me.”

Engano smiled. “Always the same, Moreno, but you come back for more.” A split second after finishing her sentence, she swiftly kicked Clarissa in her shin. Looking to take advantage of the potentially hobbling blow, she turned her body, hoping to build momentum for a roundhouse kick follow-up.

But Clarissa was ready for that. She caught Engano’s leg, and turned it in such a way that she could spear it with all her weight on the back of Engano’s knee at an awkward angle.

Engano spun to protect her knee, expecting to catch Clarissa with her leg sweep. But Clarissa was already off the mat, twisting, expecting where Engano’s planted leg would be. She crashed down on it and heard an audible *pop* that produced a gasp from the crowd watching.

Engano did little more than grunt, but Clarissa knew she’d hurt her, and she didn’t hesitate to do more. Mercy wasn’t a moral luxury afforded intelligence agents. She tried to use her other knee to knock Engano’s teeth in, but the instructor dodged it and managed, at the risk of more damage, to

twist her knee and shift Clarissa enough that she could strike her in the lower back with a pair of fists.

Clarissa stumbled backwards, her kidneys on fire, as Engano rose up, clearly favoring her injured knee.

“Remember, Ms. Moreno,” Saito said. “Expect the unexpected.”

Engano got into an odd stance. Clarissa had never seen it before up to that point. She would learn later that it was a martial art found only on a little-known planet, Uharu, several billion light years from Vassar-1. But that was something for future Clarissa to know. This version did what she was trained to do. She charged Engano and tried to land a punch combination, but the instructor split her punches and landed a bone-jarring punch to Clarissa’s solar plexus that felt like it caved in her chest.

Clarissa stumbled backwards, croaking desperately for air. Before she could recover, she found herself hit hard in her left ear, disrupting her equilibrium and sending her sprawling to the mat.

“You’re too arrogant, Trainee Moreno. Though skilled, you’re not the master you think you are. I could kill you right now, and what could you do to defend yourself?”

Clarissa barely heard Engano. She was too busy trying to regain her bearings. She wobbled to her feet, then fell down to one knee. That happened to be fortuitous, because down at that level she saw the seam in the mats that connected them to each other via Velcro.

Seizing the opportunity presented to her, just as her teacher taught, Clarissa grabbed the edge of the mat Engano stood on and yanked up and hard to the side. Unable to compensate due to her injured knee, Engano lost her footing and fell. Before she could do anything else, Clarissa was on top of her with a raised, shaking fist.

“Well, well,” Engano smiled. “We might make something of you yet.”

“Well done,” Saito clapped. “But why do you just fight with your limbs? Why not grab a weapon? And why not to the death?”

Clarissa got up, then helped her teacher up as well. She bowed and went to return to the group of trainees. But before she could sit down, Engano dismissed the class.

“Everyone, that’s it for today. Return to your bunks. We have spycraft in twenty minutes,” she said. “Not you, Trainee Moreno. We’ll have a chat.”

Clarissa stood at attention as her fellow students filed out of the room, most of them whispering about her. She paid them no mind. Instead, she

readied herself for what she thought was going to be a punishment for showing up Engano.

“I’ve been watching you closely, Trainee Moreno. We’ve all been watching you. And what we’ve seen has been impressive, to say the least. At ease, come walk with me.”

Engano, still sporting a limp, led Clarissa out of the instruction room and through the hallways of the Black Palace. The massive building hosted all manner of classes to train their agents. Another wing and most of the outdoor grounds were dedicated to AIC Special Forces groups who never, ever interacted with the agents. They did their own separate thing. All any of the agents had to even tell that the other group was there was the seemingly constant sound of gunfire coming from outside.

“I’m guessing you’re probably wondering why I’ve singled you out, Trainee,” said Engano.

“Yes, we really are,” responded Saito, who walked behind them.

“I assure, you it had nothing to do with what happened back there,” Engano said. She stopped for a second and tried to stretch the pain out of her knee; then she continued walking. “You’ve progressed more quickly than your fellow classmates. Your test scores are through the roof, not to mention your naval history. Honestly, it’s kind of freaky how adept you are.”

“Thank you, ma’am.” Clarissa didn’t know what else to say. She never took compliments well.

“And your current life circumstances make you an even more unique prospect.” Engano stopped in front of a door with a helluva lot more security than Clarissa was used to. “We were thinking of using you as a deep-cover asset. Having a family might make that harder for you, logistically, but it also gives you a hell of a cover. We’re going to send you to Earth.”

“Earth, ma’am?” Clarissa was confused. She’d never even thought of re-locating off-planet, let alone to the enemy’s homeworld.

“Yeah, that’s right. Good afternoon, gentlemen.” Engano greeted the two guards, then proceeded to start the identification process. First she had to get her head scanned. A little mechanical halo came out of the panels next to the door. It whirred as it moved up and down over her head, then returned to its little hiding place. “Anyhow, you’re going to Earth at the end of the week, aboard a ship out of the docks near the Bowery.”

“The slums?”

“The very ones,” Engano said. She moved on to step two. It involved her getting pricked by a little needle and her DNA being analyzed rapidly.

“What is this? Why does she need to do all of this to get through this door?” asked Saito, perplexed.

“It’s called security. In order to keep out those who aren’t meant to see what’s behind it,” answered Clarissa.

“Oh, that is novel. But what if whoever wants to get in simply breaks it down? Or cuts through?”

“Most humans can’t do that.”

“Not yet.”

Engano went on to the last but easiest security measure. A holographic keypad appeared, and she had to enter in an eleven-digit code. Once she did, there was a click of the door unlocking, and she opened it up.

“Why Earth?” Clarissa didn’t understand why she would be sent to Earth, though part of her was a little intrigued. All she’d ever heard were stories about where human life began, but she’d never seen it. Few in the AIC had, since the war had broken out.

Clarissa followed Engano into the stairwell that was beyond the guarded, highly secure door. It was short, just a few metal steps that led down to a grated metal walkway. Under the walkway was a cave. At the bottom of that cave were all sorts of panels and electronics, manned by a half a dozen or so AIC techs.

“We need you to work at a fusion plant in Seattle. We have reason to believe that some of the employees there are planning something violent. Something we can’t have happening, for various reasons you don’t need to know,” explained Engano. She continued down the grated elevated walkway. Clarissa paid attention to what her teacher said, but also couldn’t help looking down at the scene below.

“Like sabotage? An attack?” she asked.

“We’re not entirely sure. It might just be a dress rehearsal for something else, or it could be part of a bigger play that’s going into motion. That’s part of your job to find out.”

“But if it’s an attack or anything like that, doesn’t that help us? A blow like that to our enemy?”

Engano stopped. She turned and made sure to make eye contact. “What’s bad for my enemy is good for me only as long as it’s not coming

for me. Besides, our interest mainly lies with those who are planning it. We have reason to believe it's going to be perpetuated by a radical wing of the Oblivion cult, like those we have here on Vassar-1. The last thing we need is for them to succeed, and embolden those that have been plaguing us for the last few years."

"Understood." Clarissa didn't really understand, but she could tell the conversation on that was over. "What is this place, ma'am?"

"It's...well, since you and your family are going to be on Earth, I thought it was only fair that you get to see where we control the bigass gun we have pointed at it, Agent Moreno." Engano gave Clarissa a wry smile.

"Agent?"

Engano didn't smile, but she nodded. "So it is. No big graduation like the others, but I think we both know this is better. We're running a damn spy school, not the city sentinel academy."

"Thank you, ma'am," Clarissa said.

"Don't get a big head," Engano said. "Now come. Let's get down here, make sure you know your family is gonna be safe."

"This is it!" Saito said excitedly. "This is what we've been looking for. Thank you for leading me—"

He smacked into an invisible wall as he went to follow Clarissa and Engano. He frowned. "What is this?"

Clarissa walked backwards, following Engano towards the stairs at the end of the elevated walkway. "Like she said. We're spies. You didn't really think we didn't have any defenses against someone probing our minds, did you? Especially once we understood the threat."

"Once *I* understood the threat," Engano said. "What did I say about a big head?"

Saito was flabbergasted. "This isn't possible!"

"It's called security," Clarissa said. "Now, you can stay up here, seeing and hearing nothing. Or you can wake me up and stop wasting both our time."

"So that's the game you want to play?" Saito said darkly. "Fine. I can play this game. Let's see how dark your memories get."

TWENTY

“WHAT DO you think of this plan?” Ben asked Ada. He’d spent the last few minutes laying out what Engano and LeFleur had come up with, while they waited for Ace and Tomas to come back.

“It’s a plan,” she replied. “But they won’t like it.”

“Do you like it?”

“Not at all.”

That about summed it up, Ben thought. He stared out at the surrounding hangar. “And where did they go?”

“Just a little recon,” Ada said.

“Covering your bases, were you?”

“Gotta have a plan,” she said with a smirk.

Ben found it impossible to think of Ada as a private anymore. In any normal situation, she’d have been field promoted by now, but who was around to do that? Instead, here she was, like Ben, preparing to join an AIC military operation against UEF forces, even if they knew better.

“That’s it,” he said.

“What’s it?”

“I’m promoting you.”

Ada smiled. “Oh, you are? I didn’t realize a resigned UEF officer had the authority.”

“I have,” Ben said. “Congratulations, Lance Corporal. No, wait. You know what? No. Let’s get serious. Congratulations, Corporal Ericsson.”

Ada threw back her head and laughed.

God, she’s pretty when she smiles. Ben thought Ada caught his glance, and he tried to cover it by continuing to scan the hangar for Ace and Tomas.

It was so strange to be in this secret AIC base. Ben hadn't been fighting the AIC as long as his dad had, but he had more than a couple of tours under his belt. He had a picture in his head of what the enemy was. Seeing them here, in the flesh, officers and soldiers all around, he was struck by how similar it all looked to every operation he'd ever been a part of. They were people just like the ones he fought alongside, only in different uniforms.

"Oh look, here come Tweedledee and Tweedledum now," Ada said as Tomas and Ace returned. "Find anything good?"

"There's nothing good here," Ace said darkly. "This shit is old as hell."

"But well maintained," Tomas offered.

"Things are warming up," Ada said, nodding behind them. They all turned as the nearest of the fighters was engulfed by a flight prep team. They were swarming around the weapons package, hastily swapping out the wing-mounted missiles.

"Is that...?"

"Yup," Ben said.

"Are they really going to do this?" Ace asked. "With these shit birds?"

"We are," Ben said. "You aren't."

He laid out the plan again, this time for Ace and Tomas. It was simple, really, and it *could* work. They would need some luck—a lot of luck—but what plan didn't?

It had to work.

"This isn't going to work," Ace said after Ben finished. He crossed his arms defiantly.

"Told you," Ada said.

"So it's settled, then," Ben said.

Ace blew out his cheeks. "You guys get to zip around in your fancy ships—"

"Shit birds," Ada reminded him.

"—while me and Tommy here get to clean up the floor? Sounds about right. Just do me a favor, okay? Don't crash on top of us."

"I make no promises," Ada said.

"Why isn't Ace flying with you two?" Tomas asked. "You need pilots. He's flown dropships. I can handle myself."

"Whoa, hang on, now," Ace said. "I'm not flying in one of those things."

“I’m not sending you out there alone,” Ben said firmly. “I don’t care how desperate they are for pilots.”

“It is a fair question, though,” Ada said. “He’s got more experience than I do.”

Ben didn’t have an answer. Why *did* he want Ada in the air with him so much more than Ace? Wouldn’t she be safer on the ground? Maybe he just wanted her nearby in a fight, but he didn’t think that was it.

“Well, Ace?”

“Nope,” Ace said. “Uh-uh. No way. Crashed enough to know that I’m safer down here than up there.”

Ben glanced over at Ada. “It sounds like you’re stuck with me.”

It might have been his imagination, but Ada looked relieved, too. “All right,” she said at last. “But chickening out like that will come back to bite you, Ace.”

“I’ll take my chances,” Ace said.

“How about Engano?” Tomas asked.

Ace spat. “What about her?”

Ben tended to agree with the sentiment. “She’s staying behind to coordinate.”

“Shocker,” Ace said.

Ada looked thoughtful. “LeFay warned me about her.”

“Hey, what about LeFay?” Tomas asked, as if he’d just noticed she was gone.

“What are you, our den mother now?” Ace asked sarcastically. “We don’t need an update on everybody.”

“She did save our lives,” Tomas said.

Ben sometimes underestimated the big, quiet Marine, but he was loyal and formed bonds fast. Both of those were qualities that he’d always appreciated in the Marines stationed on the ships he’d served on.

“She went back for Clarissa,” Ada said.

Ace nodded. “So maybe we’ll see her. There you go,” he said to Tomas.

“We’ve made it this far,” Ben said firmly. “Let’s make sure we all come back in one piece. Three hours. We meet back here in three hours, no matter the outcome out there.”

Tomas put his fist forward. “Three hours.”

Ada did the same. “Three hours.”

Ben joined them with his fist forward. He was no Marine, but he honored their traditions.

“Do I have to do this?” Ace asked.

“Dude,” Tomas said.

“Fine,” Ace said, rolling his eyes and putting his fist forward. “Yay, team.”

TWENTY-ONE

AN HOUR LATER, Ada watched Ace and Tomas walk toward the bunker entrance, then turned to join Ben in heading toward the strange AIC fighters lined up in the bunker.

She could see them swapping out the munitions on several as they went by, the desperate last-minute changes happening literally the moment each missile was ready. They couldn't wait any longer. The *Atlas* was stationary now, but she was beginning to send down landing parties to the surface. If they were going to strike, now was the time.

Nerves were high in the controlled chaos of the AIC bunker. Other pilots and engineers were making last-minute fixes and adjustments to the ships. Everyone knew what they were flying into.

Out of everyone in that bunker, Ada figured she was probably the one with the least flight experience. Though Clarissa had taught her plenty and Ben had spent the last hour going over the basics, she still wasn't terribly confident. The autopilot would help, but when the bullets and missiles started flying, it would be all on her.

As she made her way over to her ship, Ada looked out over the bunker and wondered where the hell the exit was. There was a small roll-up at the far end of the hangar, but it only looked big enough to fit one ship at a time. Even with each vessel taking its turn, how did it work? Was it a ramp way up, or did they have to vertically ascend? She wasn't sure.

"Two three five, two three six, two three seven, here it is," Ada counted out loud to herself as she walked down the aisles of AIC fighter ships. She stopped at one marked with the numbers 238. A streak of blue paint had been hastily spread across the side.

Ada was nervous. She'd never been so nervous in her life, even when she was dodging homicidal shapeshifting aliens. Why hadn't she gone with Tomas and told Ace to suck it up? She blamed Ben, although it wasn't like he'd twisted her arm.

After taking a deep breath, Ada stepped onto the portable grated-metal steps that led up to the cockpit of her AIC fighter 238. Each step felt like an eternity as she ascended. When she reached the top, she looked inside the cockpit.

Ada saw a layer of dust coating everything inside her fighter. *You've got to be kidding me. These are what we're going to use to take out the Shapeless?*

She used the sleeve of her newly-acquired flight jacket to wipe off the instruments. Then she climbed in. It was surprisingly comfortable, not that she could enjoy it. She was too busy not throwing up from nerves.

"Okay, what was first, what was....that's right." Ada tried to recall the pre-flight protocols. She had one thing going for her, despite her lack of experience. Helping her all throughout her life, especially school and university, was a photographic memory. It only took a little probing in her own mind before all she'd learned and read in the last hour came back to her.

"You all good?" Ben was running through a pre-check in the ship next to Ada. Actually, that wasn't true. He looked to be done already.

"Yeah." Ada had no confidence in her voice at all.

"No, you're not," Ben chuckled. "Hang on." He climbed out of his fighter and came to the top of the stairs next to hers, resting his arms on her cockpit's rim.

"Is it that obvious?"

"Painfully," Ben said. "It's refreshing."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Ada asked.

"I'm positive this is the first time I've actually been calmer than you since we met. And as I recall, when we first met, you'd just blown up a room full of those Shapeless bastards without breaking a sweat."

"That might be some revisionist history," Ada said.

"Possibly," Ben said. "But my point stands."

"I should have made Ace do this."

"No offense to Ace, but I like you up here a lot better."

"Why's that?" she asked.

“Well...” Ben tapped his fingers on the seemingly thin but strong outer metal of Ada’s AIC fighter. “You’re about to head out of here in several thousand pounds of metal, armed with untested incendiary weapons and a tank full of unstable matter as fuel. On top of that, you’re going to go fight an enemy that’s literally alien, damn hard to kill, and has superior numbers.”

“So Ace couldn’t do that?”

“I haven’t seen Ace do anything that you couldn’t do better.”

Ada smiled in spite of her nerves. “Not sure if that’s a compliment or not.”

“Yeah, it sounded better in my head,” Ben said. He walked her through the rest of her checklist. When they were done, Ben gave her a sideways glance. Ada squirmed a bit. She still felt so uncomfortable in the cockpit.

“What?”

“I’m just trying to remember this moment,” he said. “When you actually looked a little nervous.”

She flipped him off.

“There it is,” he said with a smile. “Just remember—”

Ben was cut off by a booming voice over some hidden speakers that were broadcasting into the bunker.

“Attention! This is Senator LeFleur! Ladies and gentlemen, the time has come to fight back!”

Ben rolled his eyes. “Sounds like shit’s getting real.”

“What were you going to tell me?” Ada asked. She felt her palms sweaty on the flight stick. It suddenly seemed like every piece of advice she could get was critical.

“Not important,” he said.

“No, really,” she said.

Ben took a deep breath and leaned into her cockpit. His face was next to hers, and she was suddenly acutely aware of his warm breath on her face. “I’m going to do something, and I need you to not punch me,” he said.

Before she could answer, he lightly kissed her on the lips.

Ada was more shocked than anything. Ben seemed almost embarrassed about it, too.

“For good luck,” he said, then leaned back out of her cockpit and banged the side of her fighter as he hopped down the steps and headed over to his.

“Yeah,” Ada said. “Good luck.”

TWENTY-TWO

“NOW, I’m not one for speeches,” LeFleur boomed over the loudspeakers. “At least not to soldiers. I’m used to talking to other politicians. But I hope what I have to say helps even one of you brave heroic souls who are going to put it all on the line today.”

Ada glanced over at Ben. He held up a headset and pointed to it. *Oh shit, right.* Without HUDs, they needed to use more old-school techniques to communicate. She grabbed hers and put it on.

“Okay, everyone from Blue Squadron who’s got their headsets on. Ignore the politician and listen up. This is Blue One. We’re gonna be responsible for attacking the main *Atlas*. We’ve got four fighters loaded up with our new toys, those hell-gel missiles. Our intel suggested that they’ll be critical in neutralizing that beast of a starship,” Blue One said, not sounding like he put much stock in it. “It’s a big assignment. But if you listen up, follow orders, and do your job, we’ll all see this thing through. So I need everyone to close and pressurize, do your system checks, and sound off. In order. Let’s start with you, Blue Two.”

It was strange hearing someone’s voice through headphones on top of her ears instead of hearing the voice inside her head. Ada pressurized her cockpit and waited for what came next.

“Ada, Blue Seven,” Ben said. “Do you read me?”

“This is Blue Seven, I read you, Blue Two.”

“You good?”

“As good as I’ll ever be.”

Yellow lights atop the bunker spun as an alarm went off, signaling the opening of the big rollup doors. It looked like that was indeed going to be

the way they launched. The first AIC fighter ships were rolled into place by a big pulley system in the hangar's floor.

Ada's leg shook as she turned on nav systems and her radar. Angry at herself for being so nervous, she grabbed her leg by the knee and tried to forcefully stop it. Already set to automatically take off in line with the others, her ship moved up a length on its own as the first fighter took off up through the launch door.

One by one, the fighters took off. Ada slowly crept closer to her turn, feeling her stomach jumping around.

"Once you get out there, stick close to me, Blue Seven." Those were Ben's last words before his ship fired up and out the launch door.

Finally, Ada's ship rolled up to the launch door. The ground shifted and angled nearly straight upward, her ship suspended there by the attached pulley locks. The ramp shifted again and slammed hard into place, bouncing her around in the cockpit.

In front of her, Ada saw a rectangular view out to the world outside, set against the darkness of the tunnel leading up to it. She focused on breathing. Long deep breaths helped her slow her heart rate and clear her mind.

"Prepare for ignition." The words appeared on the cockpit glass directly in front of Ada. It counted down from five.

Ada's ship started to shake as the engines spun up. She wiped her sweaty hands on her flight suit pants. She was ready for this.

The ignition countdown reached zero.

When the engines fired, Ada was almost immediately pinned back in her seat as her fighter shot up through the launch exit. Before she knew it, the vessel emerged into the skies above Vassar-1.

She was instantly under fire.

The battle up above Vassar-1 was already well underway by the time Ada joined in. Just emerging from the bunker, her ship's shields were tested by the cannons of a pair of the Shapeless fighters, forcing her to take it off autopilot.

Ada quickly grabbed the piloting stick and proceeded to try and tame the wild beast her fate was tied to. She did her best to ignore the bullets flying all around her and the ships that sped by and narrowly missed her. It helped to focus on her fighter's built-in HUD.

Now that she was actually out in the thick of it, Ada's nerves washed away. This was a brawl, and she was always up for a fight.

On the glass, the ship automatically separated friend from foe. Enemy ships were surrounded by red halos, friendlies by green. Ada focused on the nearest red halos, finding one that was nearby and heading away from her. She tried to chase it down and shoot it out of the sky, but she struggled for control. Controlling the vessel was even harder than she thought, and her initial predictions of where and how the onboard cannons would respond weren't good. She felt like she had as a cadet, just getting familiar with her rifle. She and the ship weren't seeing eye-to-eye just yet.

An AIC fighter zipped past right in front of her. Ada couldn't see who it was, but whoever was in that cockpit had two Shapeless fighters on their tail. On instinct, she followed and tried to get the enemies off her ally.

"Is that Blue Seven back there?" Ada heard Ben's voice through her headset.

"Saving your ass? You bet it is."

Despite her bravado, Ada was still firing gingerly. She only squeezed off a few rounds when she knew for sure that she wouldn't hit Ben.

"Saving me? Far as I can tell, there are still two of those bastards on my tail."

"Easily remedied," she replied, before letting go with a longer burst. She still missed, but this time she forced the pair to shift positions, and for a moment one flashed across her firing scope.

She fired, and the ship didn't so much explode with the impact as melt away where her super-heated slugs impacted it. But she stayed with it, and after a dozen rounds the fighter lost its aerodynamic characteristics and began falling back to the ground.

She banked hard and turned, looking for Ben to help get the second pursuer off his tail. But a red blinking light in her cockpit HUD told her she'd picked up a bogey of her own.

Shit.

She yanked hard left and right on her stick, but considering she was already struggling for control, she had to reduce power to keep from going into a flat spin. The bogey stuck with her like they were linked together by an invisible rope.

"Put on the auto-evade, Ada!" Ben yelled.

Ada stared down at the instruments. "Where the hell is the auto-evade?" She went over her reliable memory, but couldn't pull up any information on any automatic evasion features.

“Under the...hold on,” Ben said.

Ada saw a thruster burn out of the corner of her eye, and what she assumed was Ben’s fighter pulled up sharply—so sharply, in fact, that he inverted for a moment. The bogey that was trying to stick with him chose to spin out of the maneuver and bail rather than leave himself vulnerable. Ben flew inverted for another second before swinging down behind Ada and the bogey on her tail.

He made that look too damn easy.

A couple of short bursts and he’d clipped her pursuer’s wing. Ada watched the fighter peel away, its wing crushed and useless, then go into a death spiral into the ground, its structure crumpling up like a balled-up piece of paper.

Ada waited to see an impact explosion on the ground below, but instead of a fireball crashing into the ground, the fighter broke up into a pair of very much intact Shapeless creatures before hitting the ground.

“So about that auto-evade!” Ada yelled. Her whole ship shook as her shields absorbed shot after shot from a second fighter that had slid up on her tail.

“Under the engine regulators. See it? It should be a yellow button!”

Ada scanned frantically. At last she found the yellow button. She reached down to press it just as her fighter took a major jolt. Flashing red exclamation points covered the cockpit HUD, as did a message: “Shields Depleted.” As if the bogey on her tail knew it, a pair of missiles released from its wings.

Everything else in the world around her, except her ship, went silent after Ada pressed the auto-evade button. The ship snapped into a barrel roll and banked hard. One missile sailed over the cockpit, so close she thought she could feel the heat from its thruster.

She wasn’t so lucky with the second missile. It tore into the very tip of her right wing and detonated. The wing shattered right back to the base of the fuselage; then, in the blink of an eye, it was ripped clean off.

Ada stared in shock as the universe began to spin lazily around and she was thrown forward against her restraints.

In this moment, at least, Ada’s memory didn’t fail her. With her arms flailing around the cockpit, fighting against the g-forces that were growing exponentially around her as the fighter spun faster and faster out of control, she could picture the ejection handle on the side of her seat. She grasped the

seat and spider-crawled her hand down the edge and over, until she found the handle and yanked it. A split second later, a pair of emergency thrusters roared under her seat, and the entire cockpit detached and blasted away from the crippled fighter. The g-forces instantly lessened as her seat lowered so that she was lying flat. The now pod-like cockpit flipped and began gliding toward the ground.

As the view out the cockpit window stabilized, she saw the rest of her damaged fighter careen into the ground, smashing through the roof of what looked like a downtown mall. She knew in that moment that the city below was most likely deserted, but she still winced at the thought of the destruction her fighter had wrought. But that same destruction was happening everywhere below her.

A second later, the whole cockpit filled up with oxygenated impact foam, obscuring her view of everything and anything.

Her cockpit glider smashed hard into the streets of Vassar-1 before coming to a stop next to a fire hydrant. Ada felt none of it, immersed as she was in the foam. A second later, sensors released the cockpit canopy, sending it off explosively. She sat up, shoving the foam away from her face as she did so. Her headset was broken into pieces on the floor of the cockpit. *No calling for help from that.*

Ada grabbed her pistol and jumped unsteadily to the ground. She could hear gunfire and explosions all around her. She needed to find shelter and a better weapon.

As she took off running, she knew she should be embarrassed about her short-lived career as a fighter pilot. But if she was honest, she was happy. Happy to be alive, sure, but also happy to have her feet back on the ground and a gun in her hand. In the end, she never should have been up there.

“I never thought I’d say this,” she murmured to herself as she ran, “but Ace was right. I should never have been in that fighter. This was pointless.”

TWENTY-THREE

“I GOT A BAD FEELING ABOUT THIS,” Ace said as he and Tomas headed up the ramp to the bunker entrance. Already he could hear the fighters roaring out of the hangar behind them.

“Isn’t that every day of the week for you?”

“This feels worse than usual.”

“You’re a self-fulfilling prophecy with that shit,” Tomas said.

Ace shrugged. “I never expected to live this long, so I can’t complain if I kick it now.”

Tomas opened up the door that led out to the base of the Senate Circle’s steps. “Shut up, Ace. No one’s dying here.”

“Oh, plenty of people are dying out here, Mr. Ruis,” a familiar voice said.

Ace jerked back, raising his rifle halfway to his shoulder before he placed the voice. “LeFay? Ada said you left to find your favorite fellow spook.”

LeFay was leaning up against the wall just outside the bunker entrance. She pointed up at the skies, where a truly epic battle raged. “See that? It’s just the beginning.”

“Funny. Those folks in there think it’s the end.”

“That *is* funny,” LeFay said. She threw down an empty smoke cartridge.

“So what about Clarissa?” Tomas asked.

“I figured Engano was gonna send somebody to make a run at Clarissa, so I waited to see who it was gonna be. Gotta say I’m surprised it’s you two.”

“It was Ben’s plan.”

LeFay smiled. "I'm sure he thinks it was. That's how Engano likes to play it."

"Well, don't sound so disappointed to be stuck with us." Tomas checked his weapon.

Ace did the same. Both he and Tomas had been fitted with incendiary rounds before they'd left. Not as deadly as that goop the fighters were trying to spray on the *Atlas* up there, but close enough.

"Just figured I'd get Ada or Ben," LeFay said.

Ace pointed up at the sky. "Up in that mess."

LeFay pushed herself up away from the wall. "Well, I guess you schmucks will do."

Ace rolled his eyes. "Okay, LeFay. You know where we're going?"

He followed after LeFay, who started to cross the Government District back towards the secret entrance from which they'd gained entry earlier that day.

"I do," LeFay said. "Unlike the rest of you, I was ready for that alien-EMP wannabe. My systems were protected. So my systems are functional, which also means that I can keep tabs on the tracker that I embedded in Clarissa's body. I thought at first they'd be smart enough to look for something, considering they found her in the operating room of my, you know, bio hacks business. But they aren't *that* smart, it seems."

"You embedded a tracker in her?" Tomas said, sounding stunned.

"Pretty standard bio hack," LeFay said. "And not my first one without permission, although I did do this one damn fast."

Tomas shook his head. "The ethics of that are...wow."

"You can take back my merit badge later," LeFay said. "You want to know where she is or not?"

Tomas nodded.

LeFay pointed straight up. "She's right there."

"Right where?" Ace asked.

"On the *Atlas*," LeFay said. "Or whatever that thing is."

Ace stopped walking. "You gotta be kidding."

LeFay didn't stop as she glanced over her shoulder. "Have I struck you as the kidding type so far, sweet cheeks?"

"How the shit are we supposed to save her from an alien dreadnought?" asked Ace.

"We're going shopping," answered LeFay.

LEFAY PEEKED through a storefront across the street from the Copper Square Mall in downtown Vassar-1. She made sure to keep out of sight as all hell broke out above, and it looked like there were Shapeless patrolling the roads below.

“What do you see?” Tomas asked.

LeFay glanced back. He and Ace at least weren't getting in her way so far, which she'd take, and she'd need them for this plan to work. As much as it pained her, she doubted she could pull it off by herself. That was the reason, after all, why she'd waited for them—at least for this part.

“There's three of them between us and the mall's entrance.” LeFay scanned the area with her artificial eyes. She changed the filter to look past the concrete and into the mall itself. “A lot more inside.”

“Why are we going to the mall again? Doesn't seem like the best of times to go shopping.” Ace's gaze darted back and forth. Twisted burning fireballs that had once been spaceships were falling from the sky all over the place.

“There's an Aero-5 in there. It was supposed to be won in a raffle on Founders Day, but it doesn't look like that's gonna happen.” LeFay's gaze dug deeper. She found what looked like a vehicle. Stats popped up next to it, confirming it was the Aero-5 she was after.

“An Aero-5? You kidding me?” Tomas, not a typically excitable person, sounded eager.

“I see we got a fan of speedy planet hoppers.” LeFay smiled as she marked every one of the Shapeless she saw in her own internal system's HUD.

“Who the hell doesn't like to go fast?” Tomas said excitedly.

“How's about me?” Ace raised his hand. “This is stupid. We're going to try to fight our way inside a mall to get a planet hopper?”

“Not just any planet hopper,” LeFay said. “The fastest one ever made, at least at that size. She'll go from initial burn to docked on that ship up there in five seconds.”

“That's not possible,” Ace said.

“That's an exaggeration,” Tomas answered, “but not much. That thing is epic!”

“Throttle back there, Turbo,” LeFay said. “First things first. We gotta get there.”

“First things first,” Ace said. “Are you sure it’s actually flightworthy? Not just a prop? And that it’s fueled up?”

“I did some serious work for a couple of the guys on security here. Extra arms, custom weapons embeds in their skin, the works.”

“Extra arms?”

LeFay glanced over at Ace and enjoyed the look of horror that crossed his face. “You have no idea what I can do, pretty boy,” she said. “The point is, they kept it flight-ready because the Aero execs would come by a couple of times each week with clients and want a show. It’s a cavern in there. The mall is practically a hangar, the space in the middle is so open. They pulled down all the trusses to clear space for this thing. Trust me. It’s the real thing.”

“So how do we get in there?” Ace asked.

“You got those incendiary rounds, don’t you? Looks like it’s time to use ‘em.” LeFay stepped out of the storefront, pistol with incendiary rounds in one hand, oversized grenade launcher in the other.

She just heard Tomas ask, “What the hell is it with this woman?” before he stepped out behind her. She knew that between him and Ace, they had a shotgun with incendiary rounds and a flamethrower, pieced together in the bunker.

LeFay didn’t bother looking up or behind her. She’d had heat sensors installed in her shoulders years ago to give her a pretty accurate three-hundred-and-sixty-degree view of her surroundings. Few things sneaked up on her.

It didn’t take long before one of the Shapeless spotted her as she strolled out into the middle of the street.

“LeFay! Watch out!” Tomas knelt down on one knee, took aim, and fired at the Shapeless that approached her.

LeFay could see that the incendiary rounds were an improvement. It slowed the Shapeless and seemed to momentarily blind it as its shape mutated wildly for a moment. But then it seemed to regain its senses and charged, limbs flailing, screeching so loudly that she could hear it above the sounds of war in the skies above them.

LeFay aimed her pistol at the charging creature. Her systems scanned it for a weak point. A throbbing red dot appeared right in the middle of it, so

that was where she first shot her pistol three times: perfect aim in that exact spot. The heated rounds opened up a hole in which she placed her grenade round, blowing the Shapeless up.

“Whoa,” Tomas said. He was still on one knee on the edge of the street.

“How about you don’t just sit there?” LeFay said. She turned back around when she sensed something above. Her head spun around on a swivel. One of the Shapeless fighters was screaming down from the sky, straight at Tomas. “Move!” she shouted, pointing upward.

Tomas turned stupidly in the direction she was pointing. LeFay was just calculating her odds of getting back to him with her enhanced speed when Ace tackled him out of the way.

The two of them rolled out into the street as the fighter tore past, the edge of the street where Tomas had been kneeling torn to shreds. Both checked themselves to make sure they hadn’t been shot.

“You two done wrestling?” LeFay said over her shoulder. She’d already spotted a Shapeless trying to sneak up behind her. She hit it with a grenade round. “Because we got a ride to catch.”

TWENTY-FOUR

GLASS SHARDS CRUNCHED under LeFay's boots as she approached the mall entrance. Tomas and Ace crunched along behind her.

LeFay sensed the movement of the Shapeless inside as they started to become aware of her. She'd deal with them in a second, but first she had to make sure that whatever was in here was all she was fighting.

"We need to seal off this entrance," she said.

Ace took out a charge, jumped up, and stuck it to the ceiling above the entrance. He set the timer for five seconds, then ran and looked for cover. It took Tomas two seconds to realize what had happened, leaving him three to find cover. LeFay didn't bother.

Once Ace's charge exploded, it brought the ceiling down on the entrance, including part of the floor above. It sealed the way in, but it had also blocked a possible exit in the process.

Ace admired his handiwork. "We're definitely in it now!"

LeFay was about to approve of his handiwork as well when she heard a series of loud screeches from inside the mall. She could see more signatures converging on the blast. "We need to move, or we'll get overwhelmed."

It only took a few moments for LeFay to locate the Aero-5 right where her contacts had described it, dead center in the mall's wide-open middle. Hot red with gold highlights, it looked like the gaudiest thing on thrusters. According to her internal HUD, there were roughly six Shapeless between them and their prize, though the alien signatures were on the move. They were agitated.

They were also unavoidable.

"How many?" Ace whined when she told them.

“Relax. They look to be on the move. We should be able to avoid some of them.” LeFay didn’t actually believe that, but Ace wasn’t the kind to calm down on his own.

LeFay sat with her back to a covered railing that overlooked the two subterranean floors beneath the one she stood on. Above her were two more floors, but she was focused on the bottom one, where the ship was located.

The middle of the mall was an open circle, where you could see the top floor from the bottom. Hanging above it all was a glass ceiling that let in the seemingly endless sunshine of Vassar-1. It was an uncomplicated but beautiful design.

“How are we going to get past those things?” Tomas asked.

“You aren’t,” LeFay said as she stood up. “I will. You stay here.” She looked over the edge of the railing. “I’ll be back up here with the ship. Just don’t die in the meantime.”

“Easier said than done,” Ace said.

“Yeah, no kidding,” LeFay said. She jumped off their floor and free-fell down two stories, landing with a loud crack on the lowest level as the tiles fractured beneath her. Her augmented legs supported the impact, but it couldn’t make the landing draw any less attention.

She would love to just hop in the ship and make a run for it, but the arrangement of the Shapeless made that impossible. At least two were right next to it, almost guarding it. She looked up and cupped her hands. “A little help, boys?”

She didn’t think she’d need to tell them that, but here they were.

A moment later, super-heated bullets began raining down on the Shapeless in the center of the mall.

LeFay dodged the bullets from above, and the flailing blade-lined limbs of three Shapeless. She wouldn’t call it easy, but with the help of her heat sensors and her brain enhancements, she was able to split the process of observing and calculating her movements, which usually served to keep her alive.

To Ace and Tomas two floors above, she had no doubt that it looked like she was superhuman. She wasn’t. She was just *more* than human.

One Shapeless got close to biting her shoulder with its razor-sharp, needle-like teeth before she forced it to swallow a grenade round. She doubted one round would kill it, but the blast did force the Shapeless to

stagger and fall. That was one less to deal with on the way to the souped-up Aero-5.

She spun around just in time to avoid getting stabbed by another Shapeless. With no hesitation, LeFay grabbed the alien who'd just tried to stab her and let loose an electric charge through her arm. She'd already learned that it took five seconds to generate the heat needed to truly kill one, and she didn't have that kind of time. She gave it two seconds, and then gave the creature a kick in the chest. It stumbled back, screeching like a dying animal.

Two down. There was one left between her and the ship, which LeFay thought odd, because she'd originally detected six. Where had the other three gone?

LeFay dodged, bobbed, and weaved as the last Shapeless, seemingly quite determined to chop her up, extended five different tendrils with ends like the tips of swords, swinging them wildly. What she was looking for was an opening, but the alien's erratic movements made it hard.

Though she didn't feel it, sensors registered damage to one of her arms. There was no time to assess how bad the damage was. Instead, she spun out of the way of another attempted cut and a hail of gunfire from above, while simultaneously reloading her grenade launcher. It took way too long, which told her all she needed to know about the damage to her arm.

She finally got it loaded at the last moment and sent a well-placed shot into the crazed Shapeless' central mass. It flew backwards, and just like that, her pathway was clear.

LeFay started to run for the Aero as she glanced at her injured arm. She could see frayed wires. It must have sliced into one of her power conduits. She rolled her sleeve down. The last thing she wanted was for people to see just how little human was left in her.

She was only a few steps from the ship when she heard sustained gunfire above. LeFay looked up, expecting to see Ace and Tomas firing at something, but then her heat sensors zeroed in on the source. She picked up about five humans closing in on the pair of them. They must've been Oblivion cultists, and they weren't alone. Alarms went off in her HUD, and she realized there were three more coming for her there on the bottom floor.

The Aero was a luxury hopper. It was meant to go fast, not to stand up to gunfire. Rather than risk an errant shot hitting the Aero-5, LeFay spun around and charged at the three coming for her. As she closed the distance,

she fired a grenade round, hoping to hit them before they knew what happened. She couldn't do this for long before the Shapeless she'd put off would be back in her way.

The blast took out two of the cultists instantly, but it also blitzed her sensors, making her blind as she rushed forward. Unfortunately for LeFay, the final bastard was either a good shot, or she'd just burned through all her good luck. She took two shots to her belly a moment before she grabbed the remaining cultist by his neck and broke it.

She staggered back and looked down at the damage. A steady flow of the black oily liquid that served as her blood seeped through her fingers as she clutched her gut. She killed the pain receptors that she could as she kicked the dead cultist once for good luck before she spun around again and rushed for the Aero-5.

The Shapeless she'd hit with the electric shock was back on its feet. *How hard would another second have been?* she asked herself. But it was still staggering and slow, and she managed to dive into the Aero, her stomach feeling like it was on fire, and close the cockpit hatch while the Shapeless was still a dozen feet away.

"Piece of cake," LeFay told herself. Then she looked up as a dark shadow fell over the skylight above.

TWENTY-FIVE

ACE CRAWLED to the only cover he could find, behind a couple of trash cans. They weren't going to stop any bullets, but at least they obstructed the cultists' view of him and Tomas.

Ace tried to look out from around his trash can. He was able to for about a second, and saw two bald cultists with red blood smeared across their faces, clad in body armor. "Shit, it's those herald bastards," he called to Tomas.

Tomas was in a slightly better position, with the corner of a wall next to a shoe store to use as cover. "Oh, good, old friends," he said.

A couple of bullets sent both of them scurrying back for cover.

"We need to move!" Tomas yelled over the overwhelmingly loud, echoing gunfire that filled the mall.

"Bullshit," Ace said. He took out a grenade. "They're the ones moving." He pulled the pin and positioned himself to chuck it overhead, towards where he saw the heralds.

Then something caused the light coming through the glass skylights above the mall to flicker.

Ace stood up and threw his grenade just as the roof collapsed. He stared dumbly, right when he should have been ducking for cover, and instead watched as the remains of an AIC fighter burst through the skylight and then smashed through the top two floors opposite where they were standing. A huge chunk of the rear fuselage separated on impact and careened across the open center of the mall, crushing the attacking herald cultists.

"Well, there's something you don't see—"

A large explosion threw Ace off his feet and sent him tumbling through the air. Some part of his brain explained to him that the fuselage assembly had been filled with unstable fuel that he'd managed to detonate with his grenade. Another part of his brain, the part that was currently mush thanks to colliding with the mall's far wall, didn't care.

Ace lost a moment of time, then awoke to find blood coming out of one of his ears. He reached up and found that half of it was missing. "I just keep getting uglier," he muttered. He was pretty sure he'd lost at least one tooth as well.

He climbed to his knees and looked through the smoke that was billowing in front of him where the fuselage had exploded. "Tomas?" he croaked. He didn't see the big Marine anywhere.

"What?" came a strained reply.

Ace looked around for a second, trying to locate where the voice had come from. "Where the hell are you?"

"Down here, asshole."

Ace looked over the railing. The explosion must have sent Tomas flying over it, onto the floor below. Lucky for him, the design of the mall meant each successive floor jutted out a little further than the last. Still, it looked like he'd hit the railing down there. His lip and nose were busted open. "You don't look so good," Ace said.

"That makes two of us."

Ace felt around the ground at his feet. "I can't find my gun."

"That makes two of us," Tomas said again, and laughed at his own joke that time. Then he coughed up blood. He didn't look so good. He must have hit the railing hard on his side. Ace wondered about internal injuries.

"We need to get down to that ship," Ace said. He struggled to stand on his wobbly legs. Then he heard screeches nearby. Out of the wreckage of the fighter, Ace saw that one of the heralds' bodies was twisting and turning as it morphed into a Shapeless. It slowly dragged itself clear. "I thought fire was supposed to kill these things, not make them madder!"

He suspected that the others were Shapeless as well. This one must have somehow been shielded from the worst of the blast. Apparently Shapeless got lucky breaks, too.

"Nice Shapeless," Ace said. "You just stay there."

For a moment, the Shapeless seemed to hesitate. Maybe it understood him. Then it screeched again and charged at him.

Ace spun around and started to run in no particular direction. He cast his gaze around himself for something he could use as a weapon. Something. Anything.

Who am I kidding? It's time to get crazy.

“Stay down there, Tomas,” he shouted as he ran for the railing, willing himself not to stop and think about what he was doing. “I’m about to come to you!”

He was two steps from the railing when the cockpit of the Aero-5 lifted into view. LeFay looked at him calmly from the pilot’s seat.

“Get in, dipshit,” she said, or at least, that’s what Ace got from reading her lips. She motioned back behind her. Ace looked to the hatch right behind the cockpit. Tomas was hanging out of it. “Need a lift?”

Ace was about to ask about the easiest way to do it when the Shapeless behind him screeched again. *Screw it*, he thought. He jumped up on the railing and unceremoniously leaped at Tomas with his arms open wide.

Rather than catch him, Tomas backed into the hatch. Ace flew through it, smashing the top of his head on the bulkhead as he did so, and landed flat on his back.

Tomas stood over him. “Did you really think I was going to catch you?”

LeFay took the Aero-5 up through the glass skylight opening on the roof, conveniently torn open by the AIC fighter.

“How about that?” Tomas said.

“What?” Ace asked.

“You didn’t fly one, but you still managed to be in a crash of one.”

“Funny guy,” Ace said, sitting up.

Out of the frying pan and into the fire, they emerged into a still-raging air battle above Vassar-1.

Hovering just feet above the mall roof, LeFay turned to her two passengers, black liquid spilling out of her mouth. “Get out.”

“What?” Tomas asked.

“Get out. Now!”

“No, we’re with you the whole way,” Ace protested. “We’ll help you get Clarissa—”

He shut up when LeFay pointed her grenade launcher straight at his head.

“Look, dipshit, we don’t have time to argue. Your ride is done.” LeFay coughed up some more black liquid. “It’s not debatable,” she added as she

wiped her mouth.

“You’re hurt. There’s no way you’re making it out of there alive,” Tomas said.

“Wasn’t planning on it,” LeFay said. “Which is why you boys get out here.”

TWENTY-SIX

“ADA? Ada?! Come in! Eject! You need to eject!” yelled Ben into his headset. But her systems must’ve been fried, because she didn’t respond.

Ben blasted his way through two more false UEF Shapeless ships as he kept his eye on Ada. To his relief, even though she didn’t respond to him, her ejection pod flew out of her crippled ship. On instinct, Ben marked the point where her pod landed in his ship’s log and memorized the coordinates.

She survived, Ben. She’s okay.

The situation was hairy. Ben had known the fight would be bad, but it soon became clearer that they were tremendously outnumbered. The hell-gel missiles would have to be tested, and fast. “Blue Three, how close are you?”

“We’re starting our attack run now,” Three replied.

Ben squinted upward, trying to see what was happening. The AIC fighter and his wingman were swooping in, trying to evade the big *Atlas* near-space cannons and land a missile on one of the pre-ordained attack vectors.

If the gel worked as advertised, it should quickly spread from the initial impact point. They had nowhere enough to coat the dreadnought, so they were going to be focusing all their runs on one of three locations.

“Missiles away,” Blue Three reported.

“Watch out for that crossfire!”

“They’re shooting their own—”

The comm link died. Ben had a feeling he knew what had happened.

“They don’t care about hitting their own,” he said, “so don’t let your guard down just because you’re engaged. Chances are, those anti-aircraft

cannons are waiting for you to get engaged so they can blast both you and your bogey out of the sky.”

“Copy that, Blue Seven. These UEF bastards really are evil. How can they just shoot down their own pilots?”

Ben would have loved to explain, but he didn’t have the time or the inclination. “They’re barely human.”

A pair of UEF fighters swooped in on Ben, but he quickly got the better of them. They were clearly untrained, so he had no trouble picking them off. They didn’t know evasion techniques or how to zero in on an agile enemy; nor did they use shields.

As easy as it was at first to shoot down the Shapeless UEF fighters, Ben only felt hollow victories. Many of the ships that went down simply transformed before hitting the ground, and became enemies for those on the ground and the civilian population to deal with. And there seemed to be an endless stream of them.

“Blue Five, you’re up,” Blue One said. “Stick to that primary. Maybe I’m crazy, but it looks like it’s working.”

“Holy hell, is it working,” another pilot said. “Will you look at that? It’s eating away half the hull by the front turrets.”

“She’s still flying, so let’s not get too excited,” Ben said.

“How... how is that possible? How can that steel plating be giving out under a little hell gel?”

“Don’t ask the gods for favors when you’re getting your prayers answered,” Blue One said. “It’s working as advertised. That’s all we need to worry about.”

“Missile away!” Blue Five announced. “Right on top of the first one.”

“My God, I can practically see right into the thing.” There was a pause. “I honest to God don’t understand how this thing is still flying.”

“Give it time,” Ben said. “The more we hit the same spot, the worse it’ll get.”

“Sounds like your cue, Blue Seven.”

Damn right it is. Ben suddenly felt a swell of anger. Anger at what the Oblivion had taken from him. Anger at what they’d done to his friends and family.

He set his sights on the fake UEF *Atlas* and spooled up his throttles to full power.

“That’s not my father’s ship. That’s not my father’s legacy. That’s some damn perversion that I’m going to end.”

As he drew closer, the anti-aircraft fire from the *Atlas* intensified, but it was curiously ineffective. He started to see why as he got a closer look at the damage. It was spreading rapidly. And where the hell gel was burning the Shapeless ship, it was proving true to its name. The Shapeless *Atlas* was losing all the properties of a ship. The exterior walls of the ship were sloughing away and falling to the ground below, as if the entire ship was made of ice cream that was melting.

There were no cannons targeting him, because there were no cannons left where they’d been concentrating their fire. Blue One had been right to order all fire concentrated on this single location. It wasn’t just the best way; it was the only way. Each missile full of hell gel was penetrating deeper into the ship.

If it was a living thing, they were driving a stake deeper and deeper into its heart. Ben was happy to add to the pain they were causing the giant beast.

“I’m beginning my run— Holy *shit!*” Ben jerked back on his fighter and just managed to dodge a Shapeless UEF fighter roaring up at him from directly below, going faster than anything he’d seen out here so far.

Too fast. “That wasn’t a UEF fighter,” he said. “Did anybody see that? Blue Two, did you see that?”

Two was his wingman on the run. “I think I did,” he said. “But I don’t understand what I saw.”

“What was it? Another make or model?”

“In a way, I guess so.”

“Say again?” Ben asked.

“This is going to sound crazy, but I think it was a... well, an Aero.”

“A what?”

“A speed hopper,” Two said, bewildered. “A red vanity speed hopper.”

Ben shook his head. What the hell was going on? “Where the hell did it go?” he asked. He was searching the sky in vain, in part because he was sure that his wingman must be nuts.

“This is going to sound even crazier,” Blue Two said. “But... I think it just flew right up inside the *Atlas*.”

TWENTY-SEVEN

THE IMPOSTOR SAITO STOOD, arms behind his back, looking out at the battle raging outside the Shapeless flagship. Emotions were still new to him, but he thought he felt happy—or at least, what happy felt like for human beings.

“Why do they fight it so hard?” asked Beverly. She stood behind Saito, next to her still-unconscious husband.

“They fear change. These humans, they’re simple, stubborn creatures. They were always going to fight till the last, which is no bother. The more they fight, the more we learn about them.”

Everything was going as planned. Vassar-1, the AIC home planet, was all but conquered. The real Lee Saito was almost completely under their control. And with a little more work, he was sure he’d break through the mental defenses of his new catch, Agent Moreno, and find out where the second planet-killing weapon was.

First things first, though, he needed to get that information from Clarissa’s mind, and she was putting up a fight. He walked away from the window on the faux *Atlas*, which morphed back to normal soon as he turned away. He stood over Clarissa, who was pinned to the floor by the living ship itself. He knelt down next to her, stroked her short hair.

Beverly watched Saito. “And her? I sense she’s fighting you. How’s that possible?”

“It’s not, or at least it shouldn’t be, but I’ll find a way inside. Let us in child. Let us in so that we can help you, help you all.”

CLARISSA WAS ON HER HOVERBIKE, riding through the forests of Washington near Mt. Rainier. She was on her way to the Colbur fusion plant. Her husband had forgotten his lunch, and his daughters' lunches.

It was "take your daughter to work" day, and with the day off, Clarissa figured she'd be able to spend it in an empty home, get some reports for Engano done, and relax. She also figured that it'd been two years since she and her husband had been assigned to the plant, and there were no signs of Oblivion activity. There was no doubt in her mind that it was a wild goose chase, and had had no reservations when Blake suggested taking the twins, Sara and Mara, with him that day.

Maybe it was some kind of sixth sense, or just a mom's feeling of responsibility, but those three paper lunch bags that sat on their kitchen counter refused to be ignored. So off she went on that rainy Friday afternoon, to deliver food to her family.

"Is this when it happened?" Clarissa heard Saito's voice behind her on the back of the hoverbike. She felt arms around her waist. "When you lost them? Your family?"

"I think you know," Clarissa said softly, feeling a dull pain in her chest.

"Of course. We're in your head. If you give us what you want, maybe I'll spare you living through this again."

"You're wasting your time," Clarissa said. She took a sharp turn on the hoverbike. She hoped she might've shaken Saito off, but no such luck.

"Time is something I have plenty of. I can't say the same for your friends on Vassar-1."

Clarissa ignored Saito's obvious attempt to rile her. "If you want to see it so badly, be my guest." She passed a sign for the fusion plant, saying that it was only five miles away.

"Shouldn't you be pulling over soon?" asked Saito. He was right. Clarissa had originally stopped during her journey at a scenic overlook. It wasn't to take in the sights, but to answer a call through her HUD.

Sure enough, a video call came in through Clarissa's HUD. It was from her husband, so she found the first place she could pull over, which was indeed a scenic overlook. Not only did it provide a view of the thick woods around Mt. Rainier but it also provided a view of the plant itself, which was down in a valley, five miles away.

“You really want to do this to yourself?” asked Saito.

Clarissa turned her hoverbike off. “Answer call.”

“Hey, there she is! It’s your mom, Sara. And Mara, uh, Mara! Stay away from that. Come on over here. Say hello to mommy.” Blake’s smiling face appeared in the small video window through Clarissa’s HUD.

Mara poked her head into the video window. “Hello, Mommy!”

Clarissa couldn’t help but smile. She had originally, when this memory had occurred in real life, but this was also the first time she’d seen her daughter since she’d died, and it was so real. She wanted to cry out of joy and grief for what she knew was coming, but she couldn’t. This was a memory, and you couldn’t change a memory, no matter how much she wanted to.

“Hi baby.” Clarissa wanted to savor the moment, but Mara quickly jumped out of view.

“Oh man, this is...not sure I knew what I signed up for,” Blake joked.

“Thank you. Really. For taking them with you. I needed the day to, well, you know.”

“My pleasure, baby, really. These little monsters are making this day so much easier. Is that the highway behind you? Shit, you’re not on your way, are you?”

“I am. Got your lunches in tow,” answered Clarissa.

“Damn. I was hoping I’d be able to catch you before you left. The beasties convinced me to get them food from the cafeteria.”

“I thought we were trying to keep them healthy.” Clarissa wasn’t angry. They’d carefully prepared their kids’ lunches like they did every day. She had a dream of raising them on real food, not grub grown in a lab.

“I know, babe. I know, but they wore me down. Soon as they smelled pizza and burgers, there was no way to get their mind off it.”

“Oh no, you fed them that pizza? It comes from a damn pallet. Who knows what the hell it’s made of?”

Sara climbed up into view of the video HUD call. “I had pizza and fries and soda...”

“That so? Well, I hope you enjoyed it, darling, because you’re never having it again,” said Clarissa with a teasing smile.

“Nooo!” Sara pretended to be distraught. She laughed and climbed out of view.

Clarissa lowered her hand, where the camera for video calls was embedded, and laughed. She raised it up again so her husband could see her face. “Other than all that, how’s it going down there? All quiet?”

“All quiet on the western front. Just another day at—” Blake’s call cut off, and there was the sound of an explosion.

“No, no, no, not again.” Clarissa had known it was coming, but still hoped, in her heart of hearts—naively, stupidly—that it would be different this time.

There was a small explosion in the fusion plant in the distance, then an extremely bright white light. It was so bright and so hot it burned Clarissa’s retinas, rendering her blind. But since she wasn’t in the moment but merely reliving a memory, Clarissa could still see.

Clarissa watched as her past self fell to the ground, screaming, holding her eyes, which literally burned in their sockets. She watched as a blast wave knocked down all the trees between her and the plant in a miles-wide radius. Then they caught fire.

Saito laughed as the blast wave hit him. If he were human, he might’ve taken out some popcorn and a soda, he was so entertained. Then he started clapping.

“Bravo. Bravo. You human beings truly have a gift for destruction. So I’m guessing Blake and the twins didn’t make it out of there. Did they?” Saito stood over Clarissa, past Clarissa, as she held her eyes and screamed and cried in a fetal position on the asphalt. “And look at you, maimed, scarred inside and out. What say we rewind and do this all over again? Or you can give me what I want. No? Okay.”

Saito held up one finger and spun it around in a circle. Clarissa’s surroundings rewound like a video, back to when she’d stopped at the scenic overlook.

Clarissa turned her hoverbike off. “Answer call.”

“Hey, there she is! It’s your mom, Sara. And Mara, uh, Mara! Stay away from that. Come on over here. Say hello to mommy.” Blake’s smiling face appeared in the small video window through Clarissa’s HUD.

Mara poked her head into the video window. “Hello, Mommy!”

“No,” Clarissa whispered, shaking her head. “Not again.”

“Yes, again. And again. And again,” Saito said. “Until you give us what we—”

Clarissa felt something change. The memory flickered. She spun around, looking for Saito, but she was all alone.

Saito had disappeared.

TWENTY-EIGHT

SAITO WAS THROWN across the room by the force of an explosion, and landed on his back.

“What’s happening?” Beverly cried. She, too, had been thrown off her feet.

Saito staggered up to his hands and knees and crawled his way over to Clarissa. The tentacles that pinned her to the floor by the living ship itself were withered and brown. They kept shifting in and out of form. At last, they simply melted and started to retract.

Clarissa fell free and started to slide around on the floor, which was now uneven and listing badly. Only the single tentacle attached to her head was still in place, and it was looking sickly.

“Why are we phasing?” He looked around. Other parts of the ship jumped in and out of phase as well. “What’s happening?”

He began to sink into the floor of the room. Everything was losing its form. He turned and crawled on all fours, trying to find his way to something that approached sturdy, solid ground.

Beverly screamed. He looked back, and she’d been enveloped by the floor up to her knees.

Saito spun around and kept crawling. Suddenly he felt air flowing over him. A breeze. Then he saw light.

It was outdoor light. The ship was literally coming apart all around him.

“How?”

He clawed at the room’s door, but it simply crumbled under his touch. At least it seemed sturdy enough here that he could stand, if only for a moment.

When he finally stood, he found himself staring at what looked at first like a human coming toward him. Not a Shapeless. Not one of his own. An actual human.

“What is this?” he gasped.

But something was off about the human. Pieces of her were missing, exposing not flesh or bone, but metal and machine underneath.

“Who...how?” Saito, for the first time in the alien’s life, was truly in shock and surprised. It should have been impossible to get that far without him detecting the threat, but he’d been lost in the dream with Clarissa, and then consumed in understanding what was happening to the ship.

“Don’t worry about those details,” the machine woman said. “I’m LeFay, and I’m just here to get something you took.”

She frowned and made a *tsk-tsk* sound. She seemed to be bleeding, but it didn’t seem to affect her ability to function. “When you take things without asking, bad things happen.”

“I don’t understand,” Saito said. Whatever was affecting the ship was affecting him. He was suddenly extremely hot. It felt like his body was melting away with him inside it.

LeFay loaded a grenade round. “No, I don’t suppose you do.”

Saito bounced up off the ground, propelled by tendrils from his body. He called upon the ship to imbue him with every last bit of strength it had. Together, they rushed at LeFay.

LeFay raised her weapon, aiming it right at Saito’s chest. But before she could fire, she found her legs grabbed by the very ship she stood in. The floor morphed into arms, with an iron grip around her ankles.

“What in the hell is this?” LeFay looked down, and couldn’t believe that the ship itself was alive and defending itself. But she didn’t have a lot of time to think about it, because Saito wasn’t about to just stand around and wait for her to free herself.

LeFay was able to dodge the first two swipes of Saito’s arms, which had turned into large blades, like gigantic swords. She even managed to grab him by his shirt and let out an electric shock, which made him stumble backwards.

But it was only for a moment. Saito simply shed the pieces of him burnt by LeFay’s electrical shock. He was able to draw power from the *Atlas*. LeFay might be mortally wounded, he understood now, but plenty of her was unharmed.

He smiled and raised one arm. A tendril shot out of one of the ship's walls and grabbed LeFay's arm, the same one that had emitted the electrical shock earlier.

Unable to move her left arm, LeFay tried to aim her grenade launcher at Saito. He swiftly moved in on her.

She fired it, missing his head by inches, and blew out the wall of the ship behind him. Beverly screamed as she was sucked out.

LeFay let out a howl of pain as Saito cut off her immobilized arm. He then grabbed her by the throat and tossed her across the room.

"I don't know what you are," Saito said, "but you've badly underestimated me."

TWENTY-NINE

CLARISSA WOKE up to the sound of an explosion. She tried to move her arms, and was stunned to find they were free. The tendrils that had held her in place were gone. She sat up slowly, and realized that she was inside an alien spaceship. How?

She grabbed at the tendril attached to her head and ripped it off. A revolting slimy trail from the tendril to her forehead almost made her throw up, but there would be time to be sick later. All the walls were moving, and parts of it were actively fighting someone.

A woman.

A woman she recognized.

“LeFay?” Clarissa was still trying to regain her bearings. She rubbed her eyes, thinking she must be dreaming.

“What are you?” screamed Saito as he kicked LeFay over and over again. “Who are you?”

LeFay, who’d clearly been playing possum and waiting for an opening, rolled over and grabbed him by his planted leg, and yanked with all her strength.

Saito fell over backwards, screaming obscenities. He kicked at LeFay’s head and connected. She grunted and went sliding backwards, towards one of the ship’s walls. The wall opened up for her to fall out, but she managed to dig her remaining hand into the living ship’s floor and stop her momentum.

“Who am I?” LeFay croaked, blood spilling from her lips. “I’m Poison.”

She slammed her one good arm into the floor of the ship. Electricity crackled from her arm, then seemed to draw from her entire body. Every part of her seemed to be conducting electricity right into the ship. Her hand sank down like the floor was turning to putty under her touch.

Clarissa swore that she heard the vessel itself let out a screech. The floor bucked violently upwards, taking everyone and everything off their feet. She was being thrown towards Saito and LeFay.

In the chaos, she saw LeFay's chest cavity open up. Inside, clear as the first time she'd shown it to Clarissa, was LeFay's power core.

Clarissa was probably one of only two people in the universe that knew exactly what she was seeing and what it meant. After all, she'd been LeFay's only friend, and maybe more than that at one time.

The flashing symbols on the core told a simple message. LeFay was going to blow herself up.

"Goddamn you, LeFay!" Clarissa screamed in her face.

LeFay's face was bloated and cracking at the corners, but she still managed to smile. "Hey, kid, fancy meeting you here."

"Turn off the electricity," Clarissa told her.

"I think it's the only thing keeping it from killing us," LeFay said.

"Do you trust me, LeFay?"

"No," she said.

"Then turn off the electricity."

LeFay's smile grew broader still as the halo of electricity pouring from her body and down her arm subsided. "You always were good at making me make bad choices."

Clarissa reached out and grabbed LeFay in a hug. LeFay's mechanical body slumped forward against Clarissa, who felt tears in her eyes.

"Then you're going to love this," she whispered in LeFay's ear. With her free hand, she reached into LeFay's chest.

"I'm going to kill both of you," snarled Saito, back up on his feet now, propelled forward by his tentacles, and reaching out for the two of them from behind.

Clarissa ripped out LeFay's core, causing the biohacker to immediately shut down. Then she shoved her backwards, out the opening in the side of the *Atlas*. As they fell out, Clarissa tossed the core back into the ship.

Clarissa hugged LeFay's lifeless body tightly to her as they fell. Behind her, she heard a strangled screech from the Saito creature's direction.

Then LeFay's core detonated, engulfing that entire side of the *Atlas* in the explosion and flames.

THIRTY

“AND YOU’RE sure it flew up into the *Atlas*?”

Ben had taken two more passes at the *Atlas*, while one of the others in the Blue squadron had added another hell-gel missile to the *Atlas*’ open, gaping wound. If the ship weren’t some kind of living alien abomination, its superstructure would be punctured by now, and the entire thing would have broken in half.

He could hear the incredulity of some of the other pilots as they said as much to each other. Until they understood that what they were up against was aliens and not the UEF, their sense of inferiority next to the UEF was only going to grow.

But that wasn’t Ben’s problem at the moment. “Blue One, we got knocked off our run. Request another.”

“Go for it, Blue Seven, you’re it. We’re out after you. Then we’ll start sending in traditional munitions.”

That might actually work, Ben thought. At this point, the damage to the *Atlas* was so severe that standard missiles might be able to make a difference.

Then again, Ben could make a difference, too.

“Okay, starting our run,” he said. Once again, Blue Two came up alongside as his wingman, but there was almost nothing to worry about from the ship now. Whatever power it had, it appeared that it was no longer directing it toward its cannons. There were no anti-aircraft cannons of any kind firing.

“This is going to be easy,” Blue Two said.

“Don’t say that,” Ben said. “That’s the one thing we never say up here.”

He lined up his approach. He let his thumbs rest naturally on the release button.

What the hell?

Ben couldn't believe his eyes as what looked like two people jumped out of the *Atlas*.

"Holy shit, that's a helluva way to go," Blue Two said.

A split second later, a massive explosion blew out the side of the *Atlas*.

Ben spun away from the explosion, then swung back around. "Blue Two, you got a good lock on where that explosion happened?"

"Sure do," he said. "It was close to primary already."

"Well, now it's our new target."

"Copy that," his wingman said.

Ben came in tight alongside the injured *Atlas*, fire kissing the bottom of his ship. He lined up on the massive new hole in *Atlas*' side.

"Missiles away," he said, sending his hell-gel rockets right up into the gut of the alien ship. He could almost sense the beast of a ship shudder at the deep explosion that occurred from the missile impact. In his mind's eye, Ben could see the incendiary going to work, spreading and burning as it went.

"That's a good hit," Blue Two said.

As his wingman peeled away, Ben started his own maneuver out from under the massive ship. Suddenly something landed hard on the nose of his fighter. It was heavy and unexpected enough that it caused him to briefly lose control. He struggled, but somehow managed to regain stability. "What the hell?"

Ben stared in shock at a man hanging off the nose of his fighter. He'd managed to wrap his arms around the nose cone and was hanging on for dear life, or at least it seemed so to Ben.

He dove hard for the ground, getting some separation from the *Atlas*, which was starting to definitely fall from the sky now. The man started tearing off pieces of the nose cone as easily as one would peel an orange. It was clearly a Shapeless.

Above, Ben could sense the *Atlas* falling from the sky. The mission was over. This wasn't a fight he needed to win.

"So long, you bastard!" he shouted aloud as he grabbed the eject handle next to his seat. He pulled it, but nothing happened.

“Attention. Error,” said the HUD inside Ben’s ship. He saw movement along the edges of the cockpit, and realized that tendrils were shooting out from the mystery alien’s stomach. They wrapped around the cockpit, preventing him from ejecting.

Ben’s mind raced. He grabbed the stick again, but the controls were next to useless. The creature must have done damage to the flight surfaces. He at least managed to keep the nose up, but he couldn’t arrest the fighter’s steep descent.

His visibility was too restricted to see what was coming. The ship hit something, maybe the corner of a building’s roof; he couldn’t be sure. The world outside the fighter spun end over end. But the impact shook the Shapeless creature loose and sent it flying.

Free from what had been restricting it, Ben’s cockpit escape pod ripped free of the dead fighter’s fuselage and shot up in the air. It immediately filled with safety foam as it tumbled to the street below.

Ben fought to keep consciousness in the jarring impact that followed. The safety foam hadn’t had enough time to fill the cockpit, which only gave him half the protection he needed. His body ached all over, but he was alive. That was all he kept telling himself as he climbed out of the pod.

Ben fell to the street and sat there in stunned silence for several seconds, trying to catch his breath. The constant flow of adrenaline started to subside, leaving him feeling sick and exhausted.

Movement grabbed his attention. On the side of the building opposite where he sat, Ben saw the Shapeless. It clung to the structure and let out a loud screech. Then it jumped down to the street and walked unsteadily toward him. The creature seemed mostly human-shaped, except for the tendrils that seemed to be propelling it forward.

Ben desperately searched his body for a weapon. All he had was a pistol holstered on the side of his uniform pants leg. He grabbed it, and tried not to think about what condition it might be in. He barely remembered putting it there to begin with.

He watched as, out of the smoke and fires of the Vassar-1 streets, the alien emerged who had taken down his ship. As it got closer, its features became clearer. It was exceptionally humanoid, he realized. It was even holding a pistol of its own, which seemed odd. Something about the features looked familiar—

Ben felt his jaw drop. “Dad?” he whispered.

It was Lee Saito. His features were bloody and distorted, but there was no mistaking them.

Am I dead? Is this hell?

Ben fought back tears as he tried his best to rationalize that it wasn't his father coming towards him—it was one of the Shapeless—but something in his mind wouldn't let him. It rejected that idea. This was his father. This was the man he'd been searching for. This was who he'd come to the edge of the galaxy to find.

Ben raised his pistol. His hands were shaking.

Lee didn't slow. His eyes were black and cloudy, as if they'd oil injected into them. From his waist Shapeless tendrils extended, razor-lined and wild. Black veins protruded against his skin, giving him a vascular look. He opened his mouth wide and let out a bone-chilling screech.

Then he charged.

Ben froze. He couldn't pull the trigger. His hand refused to obey his commands.

Lee was almost on top of him.

Shoot, he screamed at himself, *shoot!* Ben quivered, desperately trying to squeeze the trigger.

Gunshots ripped into Lee, causing him to stumble and tumble on the street. More super-heated high-velocity rounds hit the ground around him as he tried to get up.

“Run!” screamed someone behind him.

Ben rolled over to find Ace rushing up, with Tomas at his side. Both had their rifles up, firing at Lee as they closed with Ben.

“What?” Ben said in a daze. “How?”

“Great questions,” Tomas said as he reloaded. “We'll answer them later. Let's go!”

“Now!” Ace said as he shook Ben out of his stupor.

Lee got up off the street. His alien features conveyed rage: pure violent, homicidal rage.

“Screw it.” Ace grabbed Ben by his arm and started to drag him away.

He didn't make it far. A single well-placed bullet hit Ace between the eyes.

He was dead before he hit the ground.

“Ace!” yelled Tomas.

Ben looked up at Lee, who held a smoking pistol. He turned it on Ben, but before he could squeeze off a shot, Ben raised his pistol and unloaded into the center of Lee's chest. He drove his father back, rising to his feet and screaming as he did so.

Tomas joined in, lighting Lee up with his rifle. Together, the two of them pushed him back a dozen feet. Perhaps it was the fact that he wasn't fully Shapeless yet, or maybe there was something else at work; whatever the reason, the Shapeless tendrils extending out of Lee's body whipped around, spinning him and dragging him off into the smoke and fire of the city.

Ben looked down at Ace. Both of his eyes were wide open as a pool of blood grew under his head.

Ben wanted to puke. Nothing made sense.

"Goddamn it," Tomas mumbled as he looked down at Ace. "Goddamn it."

"This is my fault," Ben said. "This is all my fault."

"We gotta move. We're too exposed out here."

"This is my fault," Ben said again.

He felt Tomas grab him by the back of his flight-suit collar and haul him to his feet. "The thing whose fault it is went that way," he said, motioning in the direction that Lee had run. "We can either go back to the bunker and regroup, or we can go after him."

The ground rumbled beneath their feet. Off in the distance, the *Atlas* had crashed into the center of downtown. Ben watched the flames begin to rise from the destruction.

Something hardened inside him. He pulled free of Tomas grip and felt the cool metal of the pistol in his hand.

"We're going after him."

BOOK 5: BEYOND RUIN

PROLOGUE

LUNAR POLICE DETECTIVE Sergeant Rowan Sydal was a simple man. There wasn't much he needed in order to be happy: just two things. One of them lay asleep next to him.

Sydal heard a beeping noise in his head. All he wanted was to ignore it, sleep in with his wife, and enjoy his weekend. Instead, he knew that sound meant he had to get up. The only question was for what, and where did he have to go?

Sydal lived on the dark side of Earth's moon. Apartments there cost significantly less than those bathed in light and breathable atmosphere, and they needed to save money. It was the only way they'd get off that gray rock.

Sydal sat up in bed, swung his feet over to the side, and looked out his bedroom window. It was almost pitch black. The only source of illumination came from the stars.

Can't ignore them. They'll just keep calling.

"Answer call," ordered Sydal through his HUD as he wiped sleep and any hope of a pleasant morning out of his eyes.

"Detective? Sorry. Did I wake you?" asked Officer Marsh, the designated police dispatcher for the third shift.

"I can't remember the last time the third shift DPD *didn't* wake me, Marsh," whispered Sydal, not wanting to wake his wife Maria. "Just get to the point, Bob."

"Looks like we got a homicide for you, sir. Chief wanted you on the case. That's why I'm calling so early."

“Great.” It was hard to be sarcastic while whispering over a HUD, but Sydal hoped he’d managed. “Where?”

“Under the dome. Waterman-Lau Docks.”

Even better. I’m gonna have to deal with company assholes. Can this morning get any better? “What number?”

“What’s that, sir?”

“The company has a whole hell of a lot of docks on this rock. Which one?”

“23. Near Bierman’s Crater.”

“Got it. Tell the chief I’ll be there in thirty.”

“We can send a thruster unit to pick you up.”

“And get shot down by a kid with a pea-blaster who hates cops? No thanks. I’ll take the bus.” The truth was, Sydal just didn’t want the awkward quality time with a robot cop unit, if he could help it.

There was a long pause while Marsh seemed to cast around for how to respond to that. He settled on the wrong argument. “The chief would prefer —”

“The chief can screw himself. End call,” Sydal said. He took another minute or two to stare out at space. How did he get here? It was a long way from living on the bottom level of Chicago, back on Earth, but he still felt trapped, despite having left the planet to escape that very feeling.

Sydal felt Maria’s small, warm hand on his exposed thigh. Always warm, her body was like a little furnace, and that wasn’t because of her Latin temper. At least, not completely.

“Why aren’t you laying down?” she asked in a groggy half mumble that was barely intelligible. Luckily, Sydal was an expert translator.

“Work,” Sydal said. He wrapped his fingers around his wife’s hand on his thigh.

“What time is it?”

“Way too early.”

“I thought today we were going to—”

“Maybe after,” he said. “Depending on what this shit is.” He paused. “Just go back to sleep. Hopefully I’ll be back before you wake up.”

Sydal gently removed his wife’s hand from his thigh and stood up.

Ten minutes later, he struggled to get a lid on his coffee as he joined the line to get on the forty-five bus from the dark side of the Moon to the Dome. Specifically, he was going to get off at the Navy docks, then walk to

the Waterman-Lau sections. From there he could take the lunar tram. It wasn't the most convenient trip, but it was better and a whole lot cheaper than hiring a rover.

A little coffee spilled out on Sydal's hand. He cursed the coffee, his life, and the damn moon. The person in line in front of him turned around and gave him a dirty look.

It took almost ten minutes, but Sydal finally made it to the front of the bus line. But just as he got there, the LTS worker that managed said line started to close the airlock. There was no way Sydal was just going to wait there patiently for another bus in fifteen minutes. "Stop. Don't close that airlock," he ordered.

"Sorry, sir. UEF regulations. We're only allowed to board a maximum of—"

Sydal flashed his detective badge. "You can make an exception this time. It's official police business."

The LTS employee hesitated for half a second. It wouldn't be the first time Sydal had been shot down by a bored asshole who was willing to roll the dice that he was just running late and full of shit.

But the man only grumbled to himself as he reopened up the airlock door. Sydal climbed onto the short walkway that connected the depressing buildings of the dark side with the docked bus. Then he got aboard the bus, bulkheads closing behind him.

Soon as he stepped on the bus, Sydal regretted not waiting for the next one. It was packed from wall to wall. He ended up pinned inside by the door, looking outside the window. If anyone moved, he and his coffee would likely smash up against it, getting the precious life-giving liquid all over himself.

"Welcome to LTS Line 45, service to the Naval Docks. Please move away from the doors as we depart." The automate voice of the 45 Bus' public announcement system went on to talk about what to do in case of emergencies as the transport backed away from the dark side airlock.

Like most on that bus, Sydal took this route a lot. He knew that it was about a twenty-minute ride before they got to the dome itself. One big energy burst from the transit station, and the bus would just ride inertia and a handful of thrusters to the dome station. Then another ten or so before they reached the Navy Docks. Once there, the tram would've taken another

ten minutes or so. Why he'd told Officer Marsh he'd only be a half an hour was beyond him. It'd already been that long already.

But the dead weren't going anywhere. They could wait.

The moon's surface was boring. All Sydal saw were the lights of the dark side's facilities growing more distant, smaller, and the endless grayish-black moonscape as the bus slid over. Somehow the ride being smooth made it worse. He couldn't even feel the only exciting part of the large rock—the topography.

Sydal switched his focus from the now-disappearing dark side to the Earth's moon's dome. Made from super-hard but light dura-plastics, the city-sized dome kept in breathable atmosphere and climate controls, providing the lucky denizens there all the comforts of home, but without the overcrowding. At least, that was its initial selling point.

Once the military had moved from their stations orbiting the Earth to the ultimate satellite of the moon, the population under the moon's dome soared. Constant work was underway outside the edges to expand it. With that influx of workers and new residents had come an increase in crime. Sydal's days had shifted from mostly paperwork to a constant stream of violent crime cases in the last few years.

He hated it.

The moon dome was a beacon of light that stood out against the darkness of the moon itself. It started in the shadows, but expanded into the full light provided by the distant sun. Everything went from gloomy to brightly lit and busy as soon as the bus got close.

Sydal ignored the automated LTS voice as he exited the bus at the entrance to the Naval Docks. It was so much more than just a place to build, load, and unload ships. It was a center of commerce on the moon.

Immediately upon entering the Naval Docks, Sydal's HUD was assaulted by advertisements. He needed to update his ad-blocker software. It had been a couple of days, and new patches and workarounds came every few hours.

Closing pop-ups as he walked, Sydal tried to make his way through the throngs of people towards a large, glowing neon Waterman-Lau sign. It was always crowded, no matter what time of day or night. Not only were there people on their way to their mundane office jobs—endlessly relocated to the moon for tax reasons—but plenty of others besides. Military making their way to their ships, dock workers and ship builders on break getting a

bite to eat or a stiff drink, police bots watching the crowds, and enterprising vendors in a constant battle to carve out space for their stands against the jostling crowds.

“Hello. Welcome to Waterman-Lau’s Naval Docks location. How may I help you?” An interactive holographic projection of an attractive young woman appeared before the closed and locked steel doors to Waterman-Lau’s docks.

Sydal threw his empty coffee cup into the nearby trash incinerator. He took the badge off the chain on his neck and showed it to the holographic projection.

“Welcome, Detective Rowan Sydal. You are expected.” The doors to the Waterman-Lau docks opened up. “Please proceed to the tram that will take you to number twenty-three. And have a fantastic day!”

“Too late for that,” mumbled Sydal as he entered.

Waterman-Lau’s section of the Naval Docks was completely cut off from the rest of the facilities. That was the kind of privacy that having an exclusive deal with the government to build ships could afford a company.

“Welcome to Waterman-Lau, Detective Sydal,” an actual real-life attractive young woman greeted him as soon as he got out of the company’s lobby. She was in a red dress, with smart glasses and high heels. “I’m Tiffany Lau, your liaison today.” She held out one hand small for him to shake. Her grip was deceptively strong.

“Hello, Tiffany. You gonna take me to the scene of the crime?”

“Gruesome business.” Tiffany feigned disgust; Sydal could tell. If nothing else, his years on the force had helped him pick up keen eyes and ears for lies.

“Sounds like it. We gonna go?” All Sydal wanted was to finish up quickly so he could return home and maybe have lunch, perhaps late lunch, with his family. The slim possibility of salvaging his Saturday was all that fueled him at this point, along with cheap coffee.

“Of course. This way.” Tiffany led Sydal to a fancy-looking, shiny red chrome-plated tram on hover rails. It went along the edges of Waterman-Lau’s section of the dome.

As he traveled to Dock 23 and the crime scene, Sydal looked out on the much better-lit, livelier section of the lunar surface. He watched as ships moved out from various docks: some hauling cargo; others fighter ships just

off the line and ready for duty; and lastly, looming over the others, was a half-built battleship hovering over everything else, sparks flying.

“This is kind of strange, isn’t it?” he said as he kept his eyes on the battleship being built outside.

“What would that be, sir?” Tiffany asked.

“Having a Lunar cop come in to investigate. I thought you guys had your own police force. Some kind of deal with the head honchos here to take care of problems behind closed doors.”

Like every other member of the Lunar police, Sydal had heard the stories about Waterman-Lau. And they’d all found themselves on cases that stopped at the dead end of this gigantic, extremely influential, government- and military-connected company. Naturally, no one on the force trusted them.

“We do have an internal security force. But in this case, a homicide, it’s UEF law that the police force representing the government on any given colony is the authority. We’ll gladly cooperate and provide any assistance you need.”

Sydal smiled after hearing Tiffany’s clearly rehearsed response. He knew damn well that they didn’t report all the deaths in their docks. Something must’ve been different about this case he was about to walk into. And to tell the truth, he was a little intrigued.

The small tram stopped just below a sign for Waterman-Lau Lunar Dock 23. Tiffany got off, and Sydal followed.

First thing that he noticed was the crowd of workers, in their yellow uniforms, standing around listlessly. None of them had anywhere to go or anything to do. “What’s all this?” asked Sydal.

“We asked the foreman to tell his workers that they can’t leave until they’ve been questioned or the authorities—yourself—tell them they can leave. Come this way.” Tiffany led the way through the crowd of workers. Plenty had dirty looks for Sydal, which he offered back in spades.

Tiffany took the detective to a cordoned-off section of the docks. There were stacks and stacks of airtight boxes and crates. A couple of Waterman-Lau security officers stood guard. Even from a distance, Sydal could see the plastic-sheet-covered bodies.

“Detective, this is our head of security, James Renault. Mr. Renault, this is Detective Rowan Sydal.”

The overwhelming first impression Sydal got of Renault was that he was a veteran. Small but noticeable scars on his face looked like the kind a soldier might've received from shrapnel. His eyes, dark and distrustful, had the forlorn look of a man who'd seen too much. His bushy goatee was the sign of a serious man not concerned with fashion.

A real throwback, then. And probably a bastard, too.

"Detective," Renault politely but gruffly responded with a slight French accent. When he shook Sydal's hand, Sydal noticed it was clammy. That struck him as strange.

Is he nervous?

"Good to meet you, Mr. Renault. Wanna show me what you got?" Sydal had had enough of introductions and traveling. He wanted to get down to business, see what he was working with.

"I'll leave you two to it. Please, ring me on your HUD if you need anything, Detective." Tiffany excused herself.

Sydal was sure she had a lot to do. Bringing in a cop to investigate a murder on their grounds, words must've started to spread throughout the dome. He figured she had a lot of public relations damage control to do. Before leaving, he'd call in a tail on her.

"The victims, Jay Norris and Henry Thompson," said Renault as he walked Sydal over to the plastic-covered bodies.

"On duty?"

Renault nodded. "They were both logging these crates before they went into storage or assigned them to a ship."

"What's in these crates?" asked Sydal as he turned on his HUD's recorder. It would record everything he heard and saw.

"Nothing out of the ordinary. Machine parts, some ammunition from the front lines. The kind of freight we deal with every day."

"Where from?" Sydal knelt down by the first body. He lifted up the plastic sheet. Before he took a look, he figured he'd see damage from a blunt object, maybe a falling crate or someone trying to make it look that way, or perhaps a fatal gunshot wound.

"Well, shit," he said. In Sydal's experience, murderers tended to kill their victims in the easiest way available to them. Most didn't go for brutal; instead they went for effective. Few he'd ever encountered had chopped their victims to pieces while they were still alive, but that was confronted Sydal on Waterman-Lau's Dock 23.

“Who or what can do that to a guy?” asked Renault as he stood over Sydal. “I’ve seen more than my fair share in the war, but this...I’ve never seen anything like this before.”

I bet you have seen a lot of horrific things. Did that change you into the kind of man who could do this? It does some.

Sydal had a hard time reading Renault. Maybe it was the monotone voice, or maybe it was just difficult to focus with the butchered meat bag in front of him.

The strangest part of the chopped-up dock worker was that it didn’t look like the pieces of him were pulled together and placed to make the coherent shape of a person. It appeared that whoever’d killed him had cut him so fast and so suddenly that all the pieces naturally fell to the floor, already close to the original form.

“That’s Jay Norris. Poor bastard. Looks like he got thrown in a woodchipper and then put back together by whatever sick bastard did this.”

Normally when a civilian found a scene like that, a horrendous murder, they were sickened by it. At the very least, they’d do their best to look away, even a cop. Sydal thought it was a bit odd that Renault just stared blankly at his slain co-worker. He didn’t even flinch.

Don’t jump to conclusions, Rowan. He could just be numbed by war. Does that to a lot of guys. Not you, but it did that to your brother, your sister. Before they...

For a brief moment—brief, only a second—Rowan saw his sister as he’d found her just two years earlier. She’d waved at him before opening the airlock to the lunar surface. She’d smiled before her face and body caught up to the realization of what she was doing.

“I said, have you ever seen anything like this before, Detective?” asked Renault.

Sydal realized that he must have zoned out for a second. Maybe it was more like a handful or two. That had been happening a lot lately. Maria had tried to get him to go to a neurologist, but he refused.

“No. Where did these crates come from? Their point of origin?” Sydal shifted his focus away from Norris’ body and towards the open crate that stood between the two bodies.

“That’s the strange part. See, most of these on this dock came from Earth. Hell, pretty much all of them.”

“Is that normal? Each dock only having shipments from the same planet?” Sydal looked at the crate. It was too small to hold a person. It was barely big enough to fit a damn dog. He looked inside, but it was empty.

“Sometimes, yeah. It really just depends.”

“On?” Sydal made a point of constantly asking questions. It kept most people off kilter, and sometimes reaped rewards.

Renault seemed unbothered. “There’s a lot of factors, but mostly it depends on what’s in them and where they’re going from here. This whole moon is nothing but a damn weigh station.”

Sydal stood up and stretched his back. “You said there was a strange part—other than your workers being sliced and diced.”

“Yes, sir. This particular crate, the one they opened? It wasn’t from Earth. At least, not originally.”

“That so? Where’d it come from?”

“It was an emergency re-route.” Renault paused. “From Vassar-1.”

“Vassar-1!” That got Sydal’s attention. “You mean like the capital planet of the AIC, the people we’ve been fighting for two decades now?”

“The same,” Renault said.

“And that didn’t strike you people as something to be wary of? What if it had been a chemical weapon or something worse?”

“We followed protocols. We always do,” Renault said, shrugging. He was still looking at his diced-up colleague. “I mean, we get shipments from all over the known universe, from enemies *and* allies. We aren’t government-owned, and do business with whomever we choose.”

“Neutral, huh?” Sydal stood. “How’s that working out for you?”

“We do fine.”

“Once we get all the pieces of you friends together, we can ask them.”

“Detective, please don’t overreact. This isn’t the only crate from Vassar-1 we’ll move this week.” Renault paused. “Or this day.”

Call it in. What if this is just the beginning of something much worse? Play it safe.

“Excuse me for a second,” Sydal said as he stepped away from Renault and the bodies. “I need to go overreact.”

Renault shook his head.

“HUD, call Chief Inzagi.”

ONE

AFTERMATH

IT WAS hard to keep track of time on Vassar-1. The day and night cycles were linked inexorably to the Earth, as all the colonies were. Ada never understood why the colonies, for all their hatred of Earth, kept to the universal standard time.

On Vassar-1, twenty-four hours barely covered an afternoon. The biggest star, Alda, was an ever-present sun god, and Ada had long ago grown to hate it.

For over a week, Ada had called a bombed-out apartment in Vassar-1's market district home, but she knew she couldn't stay there much longer. The damned Oblivion were closing in. She could feel the noose tightening.

Ada hobbled over to the remains of what once had been a child's bedroom window. She knew it was a child's because of all the toys and stuffed animals strewn about the rubble-covered floor, and the body she'd covered with a unicorn-patterned sheet had also clued her in.

Since she'd crashed her fighter, she'd been completely separated from her group. She'd looked in vain for Ben or Tomas or hell, even Ace. So far, she'd spotted none of them. She knew nothing about Vassar-1's layout, and with no HUD and no working equipment, she couldn't find her way back to the bunker. It was way too unsafe out there to walk blindly for too long, so the apartment was it.

But too many of the units were like this one. She could find food and supplies, but she inevitably found bodies too. So many bodies.

She felt the pain in her knee and worked it out. She'd landed badly jumping from a roof two days ago. For a little while, she thought it was

funny that she'd suffered more injuries from a twelve-foot fall than one of several hundred feet, but the joke was getting old.

At least she was alive. She was thankful for that as she looked out on the wreckage of a ship whose pilot hadn't been so lucky. Even from her distant perch, she could see a gnarled, burnt arm sticking out of twisted metal.

It won't be for nothing. It won't be for nothing. It won't be for nothing.

Ada repeated the mantra in her head whenever she came across the dead. She had to remind herself that despite appearances, all hope wasn't lost. And all those people that died in the attacks, died in the battle, their sacrifice wouldn't be allowed to be for nothing.

A large, churning liquid-metal sphere hovered in the sky above Vassar-1. She'd watched it form days, maybe a week before. Moments before the *Atlas* had crashed, two dreadnought-shaped forms had detached from the ship; then they had literally merged together to form the sphere.

It looked like the one that had been outside the Sanctuary Station, but it was larger. Maybe it was the fact that it was inside the atmosphere here, but it seemed to churn more violently than the one she'd seen before.

She assumed it was the Shapeless' home base now. That was where the thing pretending to be Commander Saito dwelt; she could feel it. Ada gritted her teeth at the thought. She was going to kill that damned thing if it was the last thing she did.

Once satisfied that the coast was clear, Ada sat down below the windowsill and took out her homemade map. She had to figure out some method to find her way through this strange, massive labyrinth of a city back to the Government District and the bunker under the Senate Circle, so she made sure to map every area that she explored on any given excursion out for supplies or possible survivors.

Ada looked over the map. According to her estimates, she'd covered about a dozen square miles from where her ship had crashed. Still, there was no sign of the Government District. There wasn't even a street sign that could point her in the right direction. Everything was electronic, digital, and displayed via HUDs, even those street signs.

When she heard a whistle from downstairs, Ada neatly folded up her map. She stuffed it inside her jacket, a military-issue piece of attire she'd salvaged from a dead man. The pockets were full of all sorts of things, from medical supplies to more ammunition.

Ada looked over at the little body covered by bed sheets. She tried her best not to think of the little girl's face underneath, but it was impossible to forget. So twisted in horror and shock, such confusion that her short life was about to end so abruptly. What did she feel when...no; Ada tried her best not think about it. All she wanted to think about was finally laying the child's body to rest.

Two men, clad in hooded ponchos covered in dirt, dust, and grime, silently entered the bedroom. No one said a word. The men simply picked the deceased girl up off her bedroom floor and took her downstairs. Ada limped close behind.

"If only the sky could open up / And her dear little face I could see..." The first thing Ada heard when she'd come downstairs in the apartment she'd chosen to hide out in was the sound of a priest's voice. His name was Father Eran, one of a dozen or so survivors she'd found and rescued. No one else was really qualified to say a few words for this child's funeral.

Father Eran made sure to speak as quietly as he could, while still letting others hear him. The rest of the survivors gathered around, heads down, in an appropriately somber mood.

"Oh, what a wonderful feeling / I know would come over me. But she is with the Angels..."

"Wonderful feeling?" Is that what this is? Feels more like defeat, failure, and helplessness.

Ada wasn't moved at all by Father Eran's words. If anything, she found them hollow and meaningless, at least for her. But she didn't oppose them being said. Maybe the other survivors got more out of it than she did. Anything to take their minds off the girl's parents, who were splattered all over the master bedroom.

The group moved out towards the back of the apartment. There was a small backyard there. Really, it was just a patch of dirt, but that was all they needed to bury a body.

"Far from sin and pain. Jesus said / "Believe in Me; and thou shalt see her again," ended Father Eran. "Would anyone else like to say a few words?" He opened it up for the other survivors.

"We need to move, Father," Ada said. She knew her voice sounded cold, but there was nothing left to be done here. "Let's get her buried and pack up."

Ada limped over to a lawn chair. After adjusting the rifle slung around her shoulder, she plopped down. It felt good to take the weight off her ankle. God, she felt so old. Everything hurt or was tired, or both.

Ada's mind wandered back to the kiss she'd had with Ben. It seemed so out of place, like it had happened in a parallel world where such things occurred, not in this dead place.

She touched her lips. She hoped the little know-it-all was still alive. Not for another awkward kiss, but just because he was the closest thing to family she had out here. And...maybe another kiss.

Ben, Ace, Tomas, Morgan—*no, it was Clarissa, remember?*—even LeFay. If she could just see their faces, one more time...

"Ada, Bishop is back." Rashel, a young twenty-something former computer programmer, quietly informed Ada that one of their scouts had returned.

Soon as she'd found enough fellow survivors in the ruins of Vassar-1, Ada went about setting up a Marine-esque system. Everyone had roles meant to help the group as a whole. There were three people who volunteered as scouts. One of them was a teenage boy, Bishop Gossler, the son of a city sentinel.

Ada sighed. "Okay, I'll be right in." She stayed outside long enough to see the first dirt being tossed on the dead girl's body; then with a groan, she stood up and headed inside.

Seeing Bishop, awkwardly standing there in the middle of these dead strangers' home, Ada was reminded of Francesca. She too was a teenager, or had been. At least the little girl they'd found here had gotten a burial. Francesca's body was still floating in a few inches of raw sewage water under the streets, rotting and bloated.

Bishop took off the scarf that covered his face. Another survivor gave him a glass of water, which he immediately downed.

"So what do you have for me, Bishop?" asked Ada.

"A couple of things. First, I come bearing gifts." With a smile, Bishop took off his backpack and reached inside. Out of it he produced a strange-looking little device. He offered it to Ada. "For your knee."

"Thank you. What is it?" Ada examined the little contraption Bishop had just given her.

"A brace, so you can move quicker. You seem like you've been a bit down, not able to go out there yourself."

“How do I...?”

“Here, let me.” Bishop took the knee brace back from Ada, and flipped it around. “Gimme your leg.”

Ada liked Bishop. The kid lived to look tough, even when he was scared out of his mind. The fact that he was closer to losing his last baby tooth than to Ada’s age didn’t seem to affect his crush on her, either.

Ada put her leg up, and Bishop slipped the brace over her boot, like fitting Cinderella’s slipper. She grabbed the top and pulled the rest of it up to her knee. Unlike the fictional princess’ missing shoe, the ankle and knee brace quickly tightened hard on her injured limb. It hurt. A lot. She stifled a cry, and settled for a grunt.

Once the pain subsided, Ada’s new brace actually did its job. The first step she took on it was steady and didn’t hurt. She was back to being mobile again. And it was just in time, because Bishop had more news.

“I found it, Ada,” he said, keeping his voice low. He was clearly excited.

Ada furrowed her brow. “It?”

“You were right,” he said. “It’s there. The assimilation center.”

Ada felt like she’d been punched in the gut. “Where?”

“Exactly where you said it would be. In the wreckage of the *Atlas*.”

“Bishop!” Ada snapped as she leaned forward. “What have I told you about going there?”

“I was trying to give a couple bastards the slip,” he said defensively, “and I ended up there. What’s wrong with that?”

Ada didn’t believe that for a second, and she didn’t attempt to hide it. “Dammit, Bishop, don’t take stupid risks.”

“Do you want to know what I saw or not?” he asked in a huff.

“I want you to be smart.”

Bishop replied as if she’d asked for details. “They got, shit, must’ve been at least a couple hundred people all lined up outside there.”

“A line?” Ada said, feeling sick to her stomach. She had no doubt, given her knowledge of the Shapeless and what she’d seen at the sanctuary station, that they were going to do the same here: replace the population with alien versions of themselves.

“I couldn’t get around to the other side to see if anyone came out,” Bishop said. Ada had been careful to explain little of what she thought

happened to those who were replicated. “But whatever’s going on there...I get some bad vibes, man. Real bad vibes. Know what I mean?”

Bishop looked tired and small. Like a kid, for once. He’d been out for hours, at least nine or ten.

“I do,” Ada said. She patted him on the shoulder. At her touch, the life sparked back into his eyes. Hormones were an amazing thing. “Come with me. We’re gonna get you some food, and you can show me on the map where this place is.”

ADA WAS picky about who she took out with her on excursions from whatever spot they called HQ at any given moment. If her experiences on the *Atlas*, Sanctuary Station-33, and Vassar-1 had taught her anything, it was that some people were cut out for the fighting and running. Others weren’t, and those that weren’t often ended up very dead.

So Ada took with her the two hooded, poncho-wearing men. Their names were Fei and Walter. Both had been soldiers before Vassar-1 fell. Neither had much of a personality, which was fine by Ada. They could fight. That was what mattered.

She also brought Bishop along. He knew the city better than any of them. He hadn’t had a HUD to navigate it when he was younger. On Earth, that would be unheard of—even the poorest people in the world had a HUD provided at birth—but as she was learning, Vassar-1 was a different world, a world of sharp contrasts. Bishop might know most of the streets around them like the back of his hand, but the more luxurious or high-income areas, like the Hill and the Government District, might as well be on another planet for him.

Lastly, Ada took with her an ex-cop named Darlene Monatua. Darlene looked more like a librarian than a cop, but she had a good head and a calm temperament.

Ada’s group, dressed in ponchos to blend in with the rubble and ruin, moved silently through alleyways and side streets, crossing through buildings whenever they could. They were heading towards the wreckage of the *Atlas*.

Periodically, Ada would check her weapons. She had her rifle to fight the human cultists who were still going through the city, hunting for survivors, chief among them the zealots/heralds, who seemed especially interested in their dogged pursuit of her. Secondly she'd check the weapon slung over the opposite shoulder, an industrial strength flamethrower she'd salvaged from a docked ship. Both were heavy and slowed her down, but she didn't dare go out unprotected.

"Okay, stop here," said Bishop. The group knelt in an alleyway across the street from a public park. They saw the top sections of the downed *Atlas* just above the burnt-out park treetops. "This is the best vantage point. At the end of that park is a cliff. Below that, a clear view of the wreckage."

"You're sure?" asked Ada.

"Positive. We might want to shed some unnecessary weight, though."

Ada saw what he meant. "Lots of open ground."

"And ships have been regularly flying over. Patrolling, I guess."

For not the first time, she shook her head at Bishop. "And you said you don't normally come here, huh?"

Bishop blushed. "I mean, not really," he mumbled. "It's just...I just have to see what they're doing."

Ada had no reply for that. Instead, she turned to the others. Walter and Fei looked at Ada, as well as Darlene. They looked at her as if to say: "Is he serious about shedding stuff?" It didn't take a detective to tell that by suggesting that they shed weight, Bishop meant to leave their weapons behind.

But Ada had other ideas. "Leave the packs, water, everything but our weapons."

"Maybe just keep one each," Bishop suggested.

"We keep the weapons," Ada said firmly. "All of them."

Bishop shrugged.

"Whenever you're ready, Bishop, lead the way," Ada said.

Bishop first took a moment to scan the streets around the park. There was no one or nothing moving in any direction. He hurried across to the park, with Ada right behind him. The others followed.

Ada was on high alert: eyes wide, ears receptive, nose smelling every little aroma. Nothing seemed off, or at least no more off than everything else.

The park itself, like all of Vassar-1, was a graveyard. That seemed to be the trend anywhere the Shapeless went. They arrived, killed everything in sight, then tried to replace the dead with their own. Once everything had been properly annihilated, they moved on. Ada saw no logic in it, no reasoning, just alien savagery. If it was a religion, she could find no rhyme or reason to its ways.

Ada ignored a dead family in the middle of a playground at the park. From the looks of it, a bomb had exploded while they were playing. It must have been very early in the attack. The dozen or so other bodies made her think that it was probably a suicide bomber who'd seen a target of opportunity.

At least they died quick. At least they'll stay dead and not become some kind of obscene alien tribute to the people they actually were. Like the captain ...

"Here we are, just beyond these bushes. Be careful, though, there's a bit of a drop," said Bishop, kneeling down out of sight.

"Right here?" Ada asked. It seemed too soon to stop, but Bishop seemed apprehensive about getting any closer.

"Yup, just stick your head through. You'll be able to see the whole thing."

Ada pushed branches and leaves out of her face as she crawled through the bushes. It was tough going. The tall bushes, meant to be a natural boundary for the park, were more than a dozen feet thick. No doubt somebody had been paid good money to maintain them. With her poncho and weapons adding bulk to her frame, she could barely get her head through to the other side. In other circumstances, it might have been comical.

Once she was through, though, the vantage point was perfect. She could see almost the whole wreckage of the UEF *Atlas*. Surrounded by demolished buildings, destroyed in its crash, it was a sight to behold. Even if it wasn't the real ship, it was as large as the original. Maybe bigger. It had been bigger in the air; she was sure of it.

Small fires still burned in the devastation that bordered the clearing in the woods, made of glass, steel, and concrete. It had once been some kind of industrial park, and Ada suspected that the steep hill on the other side of the bushes was manmade. The ground fell away sharply. Getting their group down would be tricky from here. They'd need another path around.

Most sickeningly, she saw exactly what Bishop had described. There was a long, winding line of people outside a gaping hole in the side of the downed dreadnought. Scared people, families, all being shepherded by armed cultist. How long had this been going on? Where the hell were the city sentinels? The military? Anyone?

Ada pulled her head back before she could be spotted, but stayed deep in the bushes.

“Bishop, can you reach through here and give me some binoculars? I need to see exactly what’s going on from here—” Ada’s sentence stopped in its tracks as she happened to glance down from her vantage point. She was still hidden in the bushes, but she had a good view down over the lip of the steep hillside and into the devastation below.

About a hundred feet down, on a roof of a building under the cliff side, Ada saw a dead body. That wasn’t strange on its own. But that dead body, even slightly decayed, looked a whole of a hell of a lot like Bishop.

Shit.

Ada fought her growing panic as she began to wiggle her way back out of the bushes. She couldn’t turn around; she could only back up. She tried to stay calm, but she was so exposed here, on all fours with her ass in the air like a precocious child. The stiff bushes suddenly changed from a solid defensive position to an active deterrent to her turning to face her new enemy.

She loudly broke a branch, then two more, in her haste. She needed to save the others, or at least not die stuck in here like a pig in a blanket.

“Whoa, calm down,” Bishop said. “What’s wrong, Ada? Just gimme a second—”

Ada heard a woman’s scream, two gunshots, then silence. She felt a warm wet splash on the back of her legs.

“Sorry, just couldn’t remember where I put them. But they were right there around my neck. Funny, right? Sitting there the whole time in plain sight.”

Ada yanked the rifle off her shoulder. It was absolutely the wrong weapon for the circumstances. The rifle got tangled in branches as she pulled at the long muzzle. She desperately wished she had her pistol. Ada almost had the rifle turned around and pointed behind her when it was ripped out of her hands with ferocious force. The strap that was still around her shoulder drew taut, spinning her around, smashing her face through the

thick underbrush, drawing blood as she crashed into branches. The strap finally ripped free, jolting her shoulder so hard she was sure it was dislocated. She snapped back into the bushes, weaponless now.

She spun around, diving back into the bushes, back the way she'd gone, ignoring the pain in her shoulder as branches clawed against her like fingernails. She scrambled wildly, kicking and crawling, until she'd very nearly reached the far side where she'd been when she'd first seen the real Bishop.

"Hillside" was a generous interpretation. It was a cliff. There had once been a fence here, which the bushes had surely been grown to hide. Ada knew there wasn't much of a chance that she'd survive the fall forward, but any chance was better than no chance at all.

"Let me help you get a better look," said a cold, low voice behind her. Ada felt a hand clamp down around her uninjured ankle like a vise. With inhuman strength, it dragged her across the ground and ripped her clear of the bushes. Before she knew what was happening, she was tossed in the air and slammed to the grass. She saw stars as she choked on her breath, her chest heaving wildly. Her ribs were on fire.

Ada found herself staring into the lifeless face of Walter. He'd been cut in two. His other half was about four feet away. Darlene was lying prone, face-down, a few feet away.

She turned over and started to get up when she felt a spike go through her left hand. Before she could even register the pain, she was kicked hard in the ribs. She choked on dirt when she collapsed, screaming in raw pain as she was pinned to the wet ground. Blood was everywhere.

The fake Bishop stood over Ada, parts of his body morphing and wiggling. He kept the teenager's face, but his parts weren't of a human shape. Then the top half of his head fell backwards, opening his mouth like a Pez dispenser full of razor-sharp needle teeth.

"Do you like what you see, Aaaaadddaaaa?" asked Bishop.

"Get away from me, you sick piece of shit," Ada managed through gritted teeth. She saw her rifle on the ground a dozen feet away. She was trying to calculate how to get to it when she saw Fei's bloody poncho next to it. She'd somehow held out hope for a moment that he'd gotten away, but he was dead like the rest of them. Like she was about to be.

Bishop made a screeching sound. "We're just getting start-start-started," he stuttered, his head reared back, opening his mouth even wider. It was

like his entire head was on a joint at the jawline.

He lunged at Ada's throat.

GUNSHOTS RIDDLED the back of Bishop's head.

It was enough to distract the monster. It turned to see who attacked it. Ada managed to kick the creature in the chest, sending it stumbling backwards.

She gasped as another wave of pain washed over her, as the stake in her hand was ripped out. She turned to crawl toward her rifle, knowing the monster would be back on her in moments, even if it was momentarily distracted by whoever was shooting at it.

She'd only crawled a few feet away when she heard the Shapeless scream. She turned to see a Molotov cocktail shatter at its feet, instantly setting it ablaze.

The monster screeched and hollered as it burned. Ada figured it probably thought it was immortal. All the aliens seemed to. But now, burning and fast approaching its end, she hoped the creature was scared.

Still screeching, the fake Bishop stumbled into the bushes, setting them on fire as well. It tore through the brush and rushed headlong off the hillside, screeching madly as it went. If there was any justice left in the universe, it would die on the same rooftop where it had dispatched the real version of the innocent teenager.

Two men walked cautiously toward Ada. One had another unlit Molotov in hand.

"We don't have too many more of those," Ada heard the other man murmur.

She knew the voice instantly. "Tomas?" she asked.

"Ada? Holy shit, Ada, is that you?" Tomas rushed forward.

"Ada?" Ben asked, following a step behind Tomas, Molotov in hand. His face was as shocked as Ada assumed hers must look.

She opened her mouth, but nothing came out. She just sat there, grinning stupidly with her mouth open. She'd honestly thought she'd never hear either voice again.

She closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and sat up. She winced in pain.

“You don’t look so good,” Ben said.

“Nice to see you again too,” Ada said.

“I mean it,” Ben said. “Are you okay?”

“She doesn’t look okay,” Tomas said.

“I’m fine,” Ada said, a genuine smile on her face in spite of the pain. She opened her eyes. Ben’s own face betrayed his concern. Tomas was just shaking his head.

“Tough bitch,” Tomas said.

Ada slowly stood up, waving away help from Tomas, holding her injured, bleeding hand close to her torso. “A little woozy, but I’ll live—” She bit off her comment as she grimaced around at the dead bodies of her friends. That was the end of her smiling.

“I’ve been looking all over the place for you,” Ben said. “We have,” he added hastily, nodding at Tomas.

Before Ben could say more, Tomas picked her up in a big bear hug.

“All right, don’t get all soft,” she said to the big man. After Tomas’ surprise show of affection, there was an awkward moment before Ada and Ben negotiated a much more restrained hug. Tomas again patted Ada on the back before he walked over to the remains of her group.

“I thought you were dead,” Ben said. There was a moment of hesitation as they separated, but neither seemed ready for more right now. Ada certainly wasn’t. She was still fighting off the effects of her injuries.

“No, I got lucky. I thought you guys forgot about me.”

“Sorry about your friends,” consoled Tomas.

Ada took a deep breath. What did she feel right now? It was her responsibility to get them back to the rest of the group, and she’d failed in that. But this was the way it had gone since the *Lost* had crashed on the AIC capital planet. Life was short, cheap, and fleeting. At any moment, the reaper could put his hand on your shoulder. She’d just managed to dodge him one more time. They hadn’t.

She could only imagine how cold she’d seem to Ben and Tomas if she said any of that aloud. “Thank you.” Ada looked blankly at Walter, Fei, and Darlene’s corpses. “What are you guys doing out here?”

“Other than looking for you? The *Atlas*. We heard survivors were being herded there. Needed to take a look, see what—if anything—we could do,” said Ben.

“Then we spotted your group, crossing the street to this park here,” Tomas said.

“Well, you found me.” She hesitated. “The others?”

Ben glanced at Tomas. “That’s a bit of a story.”

“You mean, there are others that made it?”

Tomas nodded.

Ada sat back, stunned. She’d held out hope, but she hadn’t really expected them to make it. She’d assumed they were all dead. “Come to think of it, how the hell did you guys survive?”

“That’s a bit of a story, too,” Ben said.

Ada looked back at the corpses of her friends one last time. She’d watched so many die. She wanted to bring them back with her. To bury them, to honor them like the little girl, but that just wasn’t practical. “I think I’d like to hear a story with a happy ending.”

Ben and Tomas shared a dark glance full of meaning. “I wouldn’t say that,” Tomas said. “But we’ll tell you on the way.”

“The way where?” Ada asked.

“To safety,” Ben said.

“The bunker?” Ada asked excitedly. “We tried so hard to find it, but nobody knows this damn city without a HUD, and—”

“No,” Ben said, cutting her off. He shared another dark glance with Tomas. “Let’s just start walking, and we’ll explain everything.”

TWO

WHAT HAPPENED?

BEN'S WORLD WAS BLACK. He tried opening his eyes, but the world was blurry and out of focus. His head pounded. The pain radiated from under and outside his skull.

The last thing he remembered was the crash. That, and....

"Oh God. Dad?" Ben shot up off the floor so fast his head started to spin.

"Relax!" shouted Tomas. "Sit back down." He was next to Ben, restraining him.

Ben stared around him. Wherever they were, it looked like it was halfway through a demolition project. "Where are we?"

"We're in the city," Tomas said. "Taking cover."

"I..." Ben pushed Tomas away, stumbling around a bit. "I just remember the crash. And my dad. I found him! He's alive! And—"

"I know," Tomas said. "You passed out. I heard you. In your sleep."

Ben stared at him. "It was a dream?"

"I mean, it happened. But you were, like, reliving it."

Then reality flooded back for Ben. They'd tried to follow the footsteps of the Shapeless that looked like his father, but it was hopeless. With the help of those tentacles, it was too fast. They'd been wandering ever since.

"Come on, sit down," Tomas said as he watched realization wash over Ben. "Over here." He managed to grab hold of Ben's arm, and guided him over to a booth.

"How long?"

"A few hours. Maybe half a day."

Too long, Ben thought. They needed to get moving. Now he could see that they were in a restaurant made to look like an old-fashioned Earth diner. Earth nostalgia was big in the colonies, even while they shouted anti-Earth slogans.

“So you saw him, too?” Ben’s vision started to steady. The multiple images of what he saw started to line up. He just needed a couple of minutes to get his bearings.

“I saw *it*,” Tomas said. “Back there. We had to save you from it.”

“We? Where’s Ace? He was there, right?”

Tomas shook his head.

Then it hit Ben. Ace was dead. It was like he had to focus on little pieces of his memory for it to come into focus. “He took a bullet to the head,” Ben said dumbly, like he was watching it happen.

“He’s gone,” Tomas said. Though his eyes watered, his voice stayed calm and his face didn’t waver.

“Saving me,” Ben whispered. He looked down at the table. Despite the destruction around them, the table was eerily unaffected. It was set for the next diner. He angrily swept everything off the table in front of him, sending old-fashioned salt and pepper shakers flying. A bottle of ketchup shattered on the floor.

“Shit, Ben, you can’t...” Tomas hurried over to the windows of the diner and looked out.

“Sorry, I just—” Ben shook his head. “I keep losing my people.”

“Your people?” Tomas frowned. “That asshole might have called you ‘Cap,’ but that doesn’t make you responsible for him.”

“He always had my back,” Ben shot back angrily. Something about the ‘asshole’ comment pissed him off, even if he’d called Ace that plenty of times. “And since Morgan—excuse me, *Clarissa*—turned out to be lying to both of us, he was about the only guy I could trust.” He paused. “Until you and Ada, of course.”

Tomas’ features softened. “We’re all doing the best we can out here. You speak up, people listen. Simple as that. Some people have that gene. My old man did.” He seemed wistful for a moment. “I don’t. That’s how it goes. Point is, no matter who follows who out here, nobody’s to blame. Ace made his choice. He tried to save you—and me, for that matter. So let’s make it count.”

“You’re right.” Ben got up. A thought occurred to him. “Did you find Clarissa? You and Ace?”

Tomas shook his head. “Nope. Neither did LeFay.”

“LeFay?”

“She went with us, but she had some other plans.” He paused. “She seemed to think she knew where Clarissa was.”

“Where?” Ben asked.

“The *Atlas*.”

Ben must have looked impossibly confused to Tomas. “That Shapeless thing in the sky?”

Tomas shrugged. “She was crazy.”

“Was?”

Tomas quickly outlined the mall escapade, and the ship that LeFay had flown off in.

Ben shook his head in shock. “I think...” He paused, picturing the red pleasure ship in his mind. “I think I saw her fly up there.”

“What?” Tomas shook his head incredulously. “It was way too chaotic up there to know that.”

“A red pleasure cruiser tends to stand out.”

“I guess so,” Tomas sighed. “Like I said. Crazy.”

Ben nodded. “You didn’t see Ada, did you?”

“Down here?” Tomas shook his head. “She went out with you, right?”

“She crashed,” he said, seeing Tomas tighten his grip on his rifle. “Bailed first, though.”

“I haven’t had any time to look. Had to grab you and get off the streets first. Regroup. The fight out there, up the sky, it’s done. No fighter ships left. No volunteers left.”

“But we expected that, right? We need to get out of here, Tomas.”

“I dunno if that’s a great idea,” Tomas said. “At least not yet.”

“And why’s that?”

“You can barely stand up straight, for one.”

“But I *can* stand, which means I can walk. Which means I can move. What more do we need?” Ben talked a big game, but he was still pretty unsteady on his feet. “The longer we wait to regroup back at the bunker, the harder it’s gonna be to find the others. And I’ve already held us up long enough.”

Tomas looked him up and down, then shrugged. “Okay. You win. Here.” He tossed Ben a rifle.

Ben snatched it out of the air, and Tomas nodded approvingly. Ben got the impression the big man had been testing him. If he’d fumbled it, he wondered what Tomas would have done. But it didn’t matter; he’d passed that little test. Of course, he’d seen three rifles tossed his way. He’d just grabbed the middle one, but Tomas didn’t need to know that little detail.

Ben checked the weapon, making sure it was loaded, then released the safety. Tomas was right. He wasn’t ready. The world still wobbled a bit around him, but he powered through. At this point only one thing was on his mind: find the others, then find whatever his father had become.

Tomas led the way out of the diner. Staring down the sights of his gun, he made sure to check every corner, every shadow, before moving. There was a big difference between the two men when it came to leading the way. Ben operated on instinct. Tomas led like the highly-trained soldier he was, surgically.

“How you doing back there?” asked Tomas, before entering the same alley that LeFay had led them down just a day before. How he’d found his way back was beyond Ben, but here they were.

“Let’s just keep going. We need to regroup with the others. Take that captain’s cruiser off this hellscape. Warn others of what’s coming.”

And kill my father if we see him.

Tomas looked tired to Ben. Probably the way he looked, too; they were both weary and spent. But there was something else in Tomas’ eyes. Determination. “That’s not what I asked,” he said.

“I know.” Ben took advantage of his false limbs. His metallic leg bore the brunt of his weight. He used his robotic arm to keep himself up and stable, propped his body against the sides of buildings as he walked, as the world around him still spun a bit.

“Here we are,” Tomas said. “Now all we need is—oh, never mind.” The security gate they’d used to enter the Government District was gone, lost in a heap of rubble.

It hadn’t been a full twenty-four hours, but the Government District looked quite different than the one Ben and Tomas had left. Refuge and wrecked ships littered the mostly open space. Gigantic pieces of asphalt, concrete, and stone had been gouged out of the sidewalks and streets by dropped bombs.

“Just like before, we need to stay low and move fast,” Tomas said. “In three, two, move!”

Tomas didn't look back. Ben followed as fast as he could hobble.

They were about two hundred yards from the Government District's clandestine entrance to the Senate Circle. In between the two spots, it was mostly open ground. Only two structures stood between them. There was a series of gazebos connected by walkways over an artificial pond, meant for nice lunches or just a rest in a politician's busy day. The second was the lone train station stop in the district. Normally meant to ferry the lower-tier workers, janitors, cooks, and groundskeepers, it had been shut down as soon as the attack started.

Tomas and Ben made it about halfway to the Senate Circle, just past the gazebos, when they froze in their tracks. Appearing up above, slowly floating into view, was a fair imitation of a UEF dreadnought.

“What the hell is that?” Ben asked.

“Popped up when the *Atlas* went down,” Tomas said. “Like they grew right out of it.”

Two more of the huge warships left, Ben thought. “Super.” One of them clearly had a mission to carry out above the Government District.

Knowing that if they stayed out in the open, they'd be spotted and blown up by a cannon round, both Ben and Tomas quickly jumped to cover. Tomas hid behind a piece of fighter-ship engine that had rained down at some point during the air battle. Ben found the closest thing, a small pile of three bodies who must've all been gunned down together.

One thing Ben appreciated about space and the many planetary colonies around the universe? The lack of bugs. No flies flew around the dead bodies he took cover behind. But the smell, yeah, that was still there. It was only made worse by the fact that the sun hadn't fallen yet.

Ben looked over the dead man he hid behind, up at the faux dreadnought. It let loose a barrage of missiles diagonally, down toward the Senate Circle. The first couple that hit, of course, exploded, blowing the roof off the government building. As one after the other followed, Ben realized they were in danger.

Pieces of the Senate Circle went flying in every direction. Large chunks of concrete and steel made for dangerous super-sized shrapnel. Ben got up and tried to run, but with each missile impact and explosion, the blast waves

rippled out further and further. That, combined with the shaking of the ground, knocked him off his feet.

Tomas simply curled up in a fetal position—not out of fear, but to reduce his body area, Ben was sure. Less body area meant he was less likely to catch shrapnel. Unlike Ben, he didn't get up and try to run. It was the right move for him, Ben realized. Tomas could depend on the huge ship engine he hid behind to provide protection. If he was meant to die there and then, running wouldn't help him at all.

Ben hugged the ground, exposed and gritting his teeth through the last salvo of missiles. His purpose became clear. They needed to get off Vassar-1 and back to UEF space. Then, he needed to warn Earth and her local solar system colonies that death was coming.

These aliens would keep advancing on mankind. He had no doubt of that. He felt it in his bones, just as sure as the shaking from the Senate Circle.

So much dust and sand kicked up that it created a thick cloud. The haze was so substantial that Ben couldn't see Tomas clearly, even though he was only a dozen feet or so away.

After a full minute, Ben called out for Tomas. He almost choked on all the dust. He could just make out the silhouette of the faux UEF dreadnought, and the glow of its engines. It was flying away. "Job well done," Ben whispered to himself. "Bastards."

The lack of visibility, the jarring attack on the Senate Circle, and the effects of the concussion he'd suffered made Ben feel queasy. He needed to get out of here, maybe sit down for a little bit. The latter didn't feel like a valid option, though.

"Coming to you," Ben heard the ex-Special Forces member shout back. He sat tight.

Dad, were you commanding that alien ship? Killing what little resistance was left?

As Tomas grabbed Ben by the arm, he almost jumped in surprise. He kept looking up at the sky. Ben tried his best to put out of his mind the fact that his father was alive, had killed Ace, and had tried to kill him. He tried, but that was a Herculean, if not impossible, task. His mind told him it was just another Shapeless, but Ben felt something different in his heart.

Tomas practically dragged Ben towards the only place near them that provided cover from the dust and everything else. It was an underground

transit station; Ben hadn't known it was there. He wasn't even aware that something like this existed on Vassar-1, and he was sure that Tomas hadn't been either, but the duo made their way as fast as they could to the entrance.

Looking down into the darkness of the station, Ben was relieved to be able to breathe freely again.

"Any idea what's down there?" Ben asked hoarsely.

"No idea," Tomas said, "but it beats up here."

"You sure about that?"

Tomas grunted. It was almost pitch black. In their shared experience, going underground hadn't always worked out for the best.

"After you," Ben said, trying to force some levity through the hornet's nest that was his mind at the moment.

"Screw that. Let's get some light first." Tomas reached into one of his pockets. Out of it he took a light stick, meant for similar situations when you needed to light up a dark room in a hurry. He cracked it in the middle, activating the luminous liquid inside, and threw it down the stairs.

You've got to be shitting me.

THREE

NINE LIVES

CLARISSA FELL THROUGH THE AIR, holding onto LeFay's lifeless husk of a body. She saw the city, the ground, rushing up fast from behind her savior. If she didn't make a decision—and a good one—quickly, she was going to be a splatter of meat and blood on the street.

That LeFay had flight alterations was common knowledge to Clarissa. When they'd been younger, LeFay had loved to go out wingsuit flying. When she'd started to go too far with her alterations, one of the first things she'd done was give herself wings.

Clarissa vividly remembered the first time LeFay had jumped without a suit. She'd caused a general panic among the other flyers, who were sure they were witnessing a suicide. Then LeFay had deployed retractable webbed wings between her arms, hips, and legs, and laughed hysterically about the looks on everyone's faces for a week.

Then she'd done the same the thing the next weekend. It took a few weeks before the joke got old, or at least Clarissa had thought so. LeFay never got tired of the shock and revulsion she could generate with her biohacks.

Until one day she did. The day Clarissa had left.

But now she was back, and desperately needed LeFay's wings.

With her power core gone, Clarissa knew that many of LeFay's alterations wouldn't work; or at least, they wouldn't work in tandem with her biological systems. LeFay had loved to brag about her marriage of biology and technology, until Clarissa couldn't stand to hear more. And she'd been willing to hear more than most.

“Goddamn you!” she screamed into LeFay’s unhearing ears, her face right up next to LeFay’s, a fist full of material balled up in one hand.

There weren’t any good options. Every landing choice meant serious pain and injury; it was just a matter of which was worse than the other. She could’ve risked just hitting the street, using LeFay as a cushion, but she didn’t want to do that.

Clarissa yanked at the back of LeFay’s arm until the long, curved portion of false skin peeled away. It helped that she knew most of LeFay’s hidden compartments and faux skin. Maybe not the latest, but she didn’t need the latest. She needed her oldest tricks.

She reached in and yanked hard. Instead of a flight wing, a modified muzzle barrel popped out. Clarissa almost tumbled off her back. She pushed it aside and found the support for the flight wing.

She pulled it out. Instantly the wing caught air, and LeFay started to barrel roll.

Clarissa hung on desperately with one hand, her other hand grabbing in vain for LeFay’s other hand, flopping around as they were buffeted.

She finally grabbed it, her fingernails digging into it and drawing blood—all except her ring finger, which was over the faux skin. She yanked it clear, and this time managed to get the flight wing to pop out on the first try.

The roll stopped.

Without the largest flight wing, which would run between her legs and all the way down to her feet, LeFay and Clarissa couldn’t truly glide. But with both arm winglets out, she could at least direct them in a controlled fall.

But it was still a fall.

Not willing to just hit the street, Clarissa decided to try and guide herself and LeFay towards a nearby building in mid-air. She figured LeFay would hit the roof, and she’d land on top of LeFay. It was the same concept as landing in the street, but a few stories further up so she’d have less to fall.

Clarissa chose the second choice, but didn’t quite make it over to the rooftop. Instead, LeFay hit the corner of the building. The former spy hit a split second later, and the two of them spun off from that corner down towards the street.

LeFay’s partially-open wings caught just enough air to soften her fall, but it also shifted the falling speed between the two of them. With Clarissa

already jarred loose by the impact, she slid off LeFay and free-fell the rest of the way.

It was a miracle that the initial impact didn't knock Clarissa out. Instead she saw the world spin like a top all around her as her body flailed and spun wildly. The second thing she hit was a balcony of the building next to the one she'd initially hit. It was that secondary impact that knocked her out.

When she came to, she was in a daze. Her eyes opened to the sight of LeFay lying in the street a dozen feet away, staring back at her with lifeless eyes.

Get up. You're hurt. You're surrounded by the enemy. You need to get out of here. You need to survive.

Glass shards dug into her palms as Clarissa lifted herself to her knees. Both ankles were swollen. She must've sprained them in the fall.

When she coughed, her lungs ached. Blood peppered her saliva and mucus as she spat it out onto the asphalt under her. A couple ribs hadn't made it out unscathed, and she'd been barely alive to begin with. Whatever internal injuries remained, smashing off the sides of buildings wasn't helping. Her stomach wound burned as if she'd just been freshly stabbed.

She braced herself on one knee and tried to push up with the other leg, but immediately was assaulted by intense pain shooting up from it throughout her body. After briefly screaming out, she fell backwards. Upon further inspection, Clarissa saw that her left leg was badly hurt. Probably broken.

A small black ship flew overhead. It looked like it was just passing by, but then it stopped shortly after flying over her. She knew before it turned back that it had spotted her.

Something told her that her former captors weren't happy to just let her go. Something had happened up there with that bastard Saito. Her mind was a fog. She'd been reliving memories. She kept clutching at her chest and thinking of her husband. She had to move in order to not be in those aliens' clutches again.

Don't try to fight through the pain. Remember your training. Remember the Black Palace. Embrace your pain.

A snippet of a memory, one she actually called forth on her own, instantly replayed in Clarissa's mind. She was in one of the Black Palace's many rooms. She remembered the sickly-colored floral wallpaper.

Young Clarissa, along with other Black Palace cadets, had to crawl across a twenty-foot path of broken glass and ring an iron bell at the end. As sharp glass dug into them, cut and sliced their elbows, forearms, bellies, thighs, and shins, their instructor ordered them to embrace the pain. They were told that it was better to become one with it instead of trying to ignore or fight through suffering, because through that suffering their vision would become clearer. More importance would come from every action, every movement and expenditure forcing the person in pain to make each step count.

Clarissa's vision and purpose was clear. She needed to get LeFay and find her friends. In truth, she should look for her handlers, but she'd seen little to put faith in there. Not that her friends should trust her after her lies, but she had to hope they'd understand. Everything she'd ever done, right or wrong, was to stop the Oblivion cult and their plans.

But where had they gone? Where were they? That didn't matter. Not yet. Right now she had to make moves.

Clarissa made it to her feet. She limped over to LeFay. Each step on her broken leg threatened to floor her, or make her pass out from the agony of it, but she embraced it. She allowed it to fuel her, to fill her with adrenaline.

She dragged LeFay up over her shoulder. It was stupid to think she could do this. She could barely carry herself. Her body was on fire. Her stomach felt like it would rip open from the effort. Her leg kept buckling under the combined weight, and LeFay was far heavier than her frame would suggest.

The black ship that turned back opened fire. Clarissa ignored the bullets hitting the asphalt all around her, and somehow managed to put one leg in front of the other. Or at least, drag one foot after the other. Hot asphalt shrapnel kissed every uncovered part of her body, and no doubt most of LeFay, as she went. But somehow, none of the bullets found her flesh.

Clarissa stumbled down a set of stairs on the far side of the street.

Her shelter was an underground magnetic rail station. At first, it seemed like the ideal place to hide and get cover from the black ship. But then she looked up and realized the roof of the station was made from glass.

Well, that's unfortunate. Can't stay here, Clarissa.

Eager to keep moving, desperate to find some semblance of safety, Clarissa looked around the magnetic rail station. She found an exit that

looked like it led downwards. It was to the subway, the Gold Line. Fate was on her side. She'd been on it more than once on a trip into the city as a kid.

Clarissa knew that Ben and the rest of the *Lost's* crew had taken her to LeFay's. She knew that LeFay had stitched her up and saved her life. And she also knew that more likely than not, they hadn't stayed at her savior's little shop and safe house. So where had they gone?

She probably took them to one of the government bunkers under the Government District. It's not far from her biohack shop. And the Gold Line goes straight there. Perfect. All you have to do is bear the—

The glass ceiling in the rail station broke, sending a rain of little shards down on Clarissa's head. Through the new hole that just opened up came cultist commandos, the zealots she knew as heralds, zipping down a line hanging down from the black ship.

Considering that the rail station wasn't very big and she was alone, not counting LeFay's husk, Clarissa knew she had to run. Little green lasers, sights from the zealots' guns, crisscrossed the abandoned station. The former spy did her best to duck and hide from them, careful not to break or be caught in their lights.

Two more zealots rapidly descended from the black ship. Something urged Clarissa to look their way. Even in face paint and from a distance, she recognized them instantly. It was the same two bastards who'd kidnapped her and taken her to that damn alien ship: Ducar and Vesta.

"That's them, all right."

Clarissa turned at the sound of her late husband's voice. Blake stood next to her. He was just as she remembered the morning before he went to work at the power plant. It was exactly how she remembered him before he died.

He'd been in the dreams with Saito. Were the Shapeless still in her head? "Are you really here?"

Blake looked sadly at her. "Of course not. I'm dead." He pointed at the two recent arrivals as they touched their boots on a platform. "But they're really here."

No reason to stick around to see what they want, even if I am going crazy.

Clarissa peeked over the bench she hid behind at the commandos, who were methodically checking every nook and cranny of the station. She looked towards the exits and saw they were blocked. No matter how much

she didn't particularly want to, she had to go through the tunnels. She hesitated, waiting for the right moment.

"Now!" urged Blake.

Clarissa didn't know why she listened to her dead husband's voice. Most likely she was starving, dehydrated, and probably had more than her fair share of injuries. She considered the very real threat of internal bleeding. If she had a chance to stop, she could address these issues with her training from the Black Palace, but right now, there was no time.

Clarissa picked up LeFay and made a run for the Gold Line tunnel. She almost made it undetected, but LeFay's lifeless, heavy cyborg body slipped from her grip as she navigated around a bench.

"There!"

Clarissa clearly heard Vesta's voice. She glanced back as the smaller of the two silhouettes swung her gun around and pointed it in her direction. The super-heated rounds easily punched through the bench, but the former secret agent wasn't there anymore. She'd dragged LeFay back over her aching shoulders and made her way into the tunnel a second earlier.

In the tunnel, Clarissa heard the exchange between Vesta and Ducar echoing around her.

"She's escaping again!" seethed Vesta.

"I'll meet you at the first station down," Ducar said calmly. "Three with you, four with me."

Clarissa heard the movement as the teams split up.

"Time to go," Blake said.

But Clarissa didn't think so.

VESTA DIDN'T CARE for Ducar ordering her around, but she let it go. Sometimes he forgot they were equals. She and her three men carefully climbed down from the station platform and looked down the dark subway tunnel.

Her life as a city sentinel was a lifetime ago, but sometimes she wished she worked with real equipment. The men with her were useful idiots, but they weren't equipped with night vision. None of them were. Instead, they used the torches on the bottoms of their rifles.

All Vesta could hear was the sounds of her team's footsteps, and the rats who scurried away scared upon their approach. There was the faint sound of dripping water, and slight breezes brought with them that musty, moldy smell subways often had. It was as if the air was sick in the absence of the sun.

"Sir, I see something."

Vesta glanced at the source of the words. The man's rifle-mounted torch was still, focused, not searching like the others.

"Well?" Vesta whispered.

The man nodded. She followed his muzzle line and saw the image of a woman, hunched over, sitting on the divider between the south- and northbound lanes of the subway.

"Agent Moreno," Vesta called out. "It's over. The captain needs to see you. Please don't resist." She silently motioned for her three men to approach Clarissa from all sides, to surround her. If anything, the tunnel felt even darker now, their torches causing light to bounce unevenly off the walls.

Vesta had never dealt with a fully trained AIC intelligence agent, but she knew the propaganda as well as any daughter of the city. As sneaky as a mouse, as vicious as a bear, and as deadly as a venomous snake. This one had been injured and unconscious when they'd grabbed her the first time. She was relieved to see Moreno's slumped form again. She didn't doubt she was capable of ambushing and killing a group of lightly trained ex-cops and soldiers at full strength.

Vesta wanted badly to order the others to just fire on her and get it over with. Surely the Pale Man would understand.

But the orders were clear. Capture, not kill.

One of Vesta's men reached the woman sitting on the divider in the subway tunnel. He slowly shoved the woman's drooping head up while bathing her face in light from his torch.

Vesta squinted at the features as she cautiously approached. The face was wrong. This wasn't the Moreno she'd seen before. Wounds on the woman's face exposed wires and metallic weave just under the flesh.

"Is this her?" the man asked, looking back at Vesta in confusion, his torchlight wavering.

"Get back—"

Before Vesta could finish her sentence, a knife was plunged straight into the man's neck.

Vesta swung her rifle up behind the man, but there was nothing there but a ghostly outline on the wall behind him that disappeared before she could get a bead on it with her weak torchlight.

Vesta cursed under her breath as she felt her blood pressure skyrocket. She willed herself to keep a tight grip on her rifle and calm her breathing.

"There aren't many places to hide down here, Agent," she said, gaze scanning the darkness as she urged the other two men forward. She wanted to flush Clarissa out again. This time, she'd be ready.

"Shadows are my friend," said a low voice, followed by gagging.

Vesta spun in the direction of the noise.

Another of her men dropped his weapon as a blade erupted from his eye socket, then slipped away through the back of his bald head.

Vesta fired wildly, shooting the man in the process of firing all around him. When she stopped, her ears were ringing from all the reflected noise in the tunnel. Only the man with the sliced-open head lay on the ground, peppered with bullets.

Impossible. Nobody is this fast.

With only one man left now, Vesta's nerves started to rattle. This wasn't the way it was supposed to go. She whispered a prayer to the void. She'd long ago embraced the Shapeless, their saviors, and knew that whatever would happen, they would protect them. All they had to do was obey.

Bolstered, Vesta took a deep breath and continued scanning for the fanatic Agent Clarissa Moreno.

"I'm not surprised you hide in the shadows," Vesta said. "You and your kind hate the light of truth."

"That so," a voice to Vesta's left said.

She swung around, ready to fire, but the tunnel was empty. She heard the gurgling sound to her right too late. She knew what she'd find as she turned.

Her last man was dead.

It was just her now.

IN THE BLACK PALACE, Clarissa had learned how to move without sound. It involved distributing her weight correctly throughout her foot to deaden the noise of footsteps. What seemed so simple had taken years to master. Her eyes, artificial, had no trouble seeing in the dark. All it took was changing a filter. And knives, well, there was plenty of training when it came to killing in the Palace.

“Careful now,” Blake said. “Don’t underestimate her. She’s fast.”

“She’s scared.”

“So are you.”

You’re not my husband. He died years ago.

“So what does that make me then, love?”

You’re in my mind.

“Lonely up here.”

Clarissa watched as Vesta aimlessly moved forward, trying her best to be quiet too. But she wasn’t. To Clarissa, she might as well be stomping around like an elephant.

“What did I say about being overconfident?” Blake whispered.

“I’m not—” She stopped. Blake wasn’t next to her. He was standing on the far side of the small platform. He pointed up, and Clarissa looked at the ceiling. It was arched. He was at one corner, a dozen feet away, but she could hear his whispering perfectly.

The curved shape perfectly carried the sound.

Clarissa watched Vesta as she approached the far side of the next arch. Clarissa silently moved into position opposite her, a dozen feet away.

“Why are you doing this?” she whispered up into the curved ceiling.

Vesta froze. Her eyes were wide—not that it would help her in the darkness. “Stop these games. Come out and fight me.”

“She’s terrified,” Blake said. This time it was only in her mind. Maybe it always had been. It was hard to tell with him.

What are you saying? Of course he’s in your head.

“Of you,” Blake said. “Of them. What they’re making you into. Not a caged bird with clipped wings. No. You, my wife, are becoming something more. Embrace it. When this darkness envelops you as well, I’ll be there with our daughter to greet you. We’ll show you to the way to the light.” Blake’s voice was soothing and peaceful, but his words were just gibberish to Clarissa.

Vesta spun around, firing wildly with her weapon, blasting holes in the tunnel walls in frustration. The noise was deafening, which was a good thing, because Clarissa was forced to dive to the ground, and she couldn't be quiet about it.

But Vesta was a bull now, all caution thrown to the wind. "Come out!" she screamed. "Fight me!" Her chest heaved as the heavy weapon twitched in her hands.

"Okay," answered Clarissa, rising to her feet behind Vesta and plunging her knife deep into her side, finding the spot just below her ribcage where she could do the most damage. With a quick flick, she twisted the knife, then slipped it back out.

Vesta screamed in pain, but had the composure to spun around and fire. But Clarissa had made sure she was right next to a column, and was already behind it.

Vesta staggered, wincing in pain as blood flowed freely down her side. She tried to put pressure on it while keeping her rifle trained in front of her. She looked more stunned than anything.

Clarissa waited for her to take a step, then drove her knife into Vesta's shoulder. Vesta dropped the rifle with a scream as Clarissa danced away.

"You coward!" she yelled.

"Coward?" Clarissa whispered upward in the darkness, now back on the other side of the arch and once again using the curved ceiling to toy with her prey. And Vesta *was* her prey now. She deserved to suffer. "How about all those innocents you murdered or helped murder?"

Vesta staggered and fell. The blood pouring out of her side was making her entire left pant leg crimson in Clarissa's night vision. She tried to apply pressure with her left hand, but only whimpered from the deep cut that Clarissa had given her shoulder. She could only make a crude attempt with the elbow of her right arm.

"No one is innocent," Vesta said.

"Least of all you," Clarissa said. She had little fear of Vesta now.

"Fight me," pleaded Vesta, her voice growing weak.

"And what? Make it a fair fight? There's nothing fair about your kind. Men, women, and children, all subject to your slaughter. Should I not slaughter you myself, turn the tables, let some of those spirits rest easy?" Clarissa kicked Vesta as hard as she could in the zealot's Kevlar-clad chest, knocking her down on her ass. "What's to stop me?"

“Please,” Vesta gasped, unable to sit up.

The bitter reality that she was about to die seemed to pass over her face as Clarissa watched. Satisfied that she was pacified, Clarissa stood openly over Vesta. She clutched Vesta’s shoulder, driving her thumb deep into the wound there as she yanked her upright.

Vesta gasped, but didn’t seem to have the strength left to even scream. Her tongue seemed to hang loose in her throat. She barely moved.

Clarissa knew the right thing to do was kill her. End the torture.

“But she deserves the torture,” Blake whispered in her ear. He was kneeling down next to her. “Doesn’t she?”

Vesta’s eyes began to roll back. Clarissa dug her thumb in deeper, and Vesta winced again.

“Please what?” Clarissa asked. “Please don’t kill you? Please spare your life? Please get it over with quick? You need to be more specific.”

Vesta, in a last-ditch effort to save herself, grabbed Clarissa by the wrist and tried to pull her down to her level. But she barely had any strength in her grip. It slipped off Clarissa like soft tissue. “Please don’t.”

Clarissa answered by slicing open Vesta’s stomach and letting her guts steam up the cool tunnel. She stood, her own legs suddenly weak.

Did I really just do that?

“You did what you had to,” Blake said, standing next to her. “It wasn’t torture. It was revenge.”

Clarissa wiped her knife off on her shirt, feeling her strength return. Then she sheathed it, cannibalized all the ammo and weapons she could from her gutted opponent, and turned back toward LeFay’s prone body. Blake had disappeared.

As she picked LeFay up, she realized that this was the first time in a long time that she didn’t feel the pain in her side. Killing Vesta seemed to relieve all her own pain.

“Come on, you crazy bitch,” Clarissa said to LeFay, thinking she could just as well use the expression on herself as she glanced around once more, looking for the visage of her dead husband. “Let’s get you a new power source. I’m tired of fighting alone.”

FOUR

AND IT FEELS SO GOOD

“SO YOU JUST RAN INTO her in the subway?” Ada asked incredulously. She’d just listened to Ben recount how he and Tomas had managed to survive and meet up with Clarissa and LeFay, or what was left of LeFay.

Ben shrugged. “Seems more like she ran into us. She was headed for the bunker.”

Tomas agreed. “She was like a pig in the slop down there,” the old farmer said. “Those eyes of hers made it easy going.”

Ada shook her head. “And yet you ended up back here?” They were standing in front of LeFay’s biohack shop.

“Those zealots checked it once,” Ben said. “We’re guessing they won’t check again. Besides, Clarissa figured there’d be a backup power source or another power core for LeFay here.”

“Especially after we saw everything go down at the bunker,” Tomas agreed. “Where else can we go?”

Tomas began to mess with a security pad on the door, while Ada’s thoughts wandered to her own not-so-safehouse, where her group was holed up. She had to get back to them soon before they gave up on her and moved on, or all got killed. Just like Ace.

She’d been shocked to hear about him. Even though she didn’t know him as well as Ben, and he’d been no peacemaker with her, she knew him to be loyal. When Ben had explained what happened to Ace, the conversation got awkward when he insisted that his father had killed him.

“Whatever you saw, that wasn’t your father, Ben,” Ada had said. “It was just the Shapeless screwing with you. It’s what they do.” She thought of

Bishop, or the thing that looked like him.

“You weren’t there,” Ben had insisted. “I dunno how to explain it, but I know it was him, the *real* him. There was some alien in him, but that wasn’t a fake. I could feel it.”

“Here we are,” Tomas said, bringing Ada’s thoughts back to the present as the doors to New Dawn finally opened. It seemed like a million years ago that she’d fled the biohacking business/safe house.

Had it really only been a week?

“Stay low and quiet. Clarissa’s waiting for us,” Tomas said curtly. *He’s really turning into a little leader*, Ada thought. Ben, on the other hand, seemed to be spiraling back into his obsession with his father. She was worried about him.

Security inside the New Dawn consisted of a laser sensor system Clarissa had put together from parts inside the shop. She saved the upstairs apartment for a defensive stronghold if necessary. Soon as anyone stepped through the inner front door, the alarms would go off upstairs and it would be time to fight. That was, if she wasn’t expecting Ben and Tomas.

As soon as they entered the New Dawn, Tomas yelled out: “It’s us, Clarissa!”

Clarissa, already halfway down the stairs, appeared out of the stairwell, gun in hand. She had a smile from ear to ear upon seeing Ada. “I don’t believe it. Never thought I’d see you again.”

“Hell, I never thought I’d ever see any of you again.” Ada hurried over to Clarissa and hugged her.

“You and me both.” Clarissa seemed happy but distracted. As she hugged Ada, Ada noticed her seemingly staring off across the room and nodding. As she pulled back, Ada noticed her eyes looked a bit sunken, too. Darker than she remembered them.

“Any luck with robot woman up there?” Ben asked.

“Stop with that shit,” Clarissa snapped.

“My bad,” Ben said, hands up, trying to play it off. Clarissa didn’t seem to be enjoying the joke. “How’s she doing?”

“I have no idea what I’m doing,” Clarissa huffed. “I got the new power core in her, but I can’t seem to figure out to turn her back on. If that’s even possible.”

“Sure this is all up to snuff?” asked Tomas as he reattached a few wires from the laser sensors to old-school plastic explosives. “Don’t want any of

us to go boom.”

Clarissa waved away his concerns.

“Did you want to go back to the rest of your other group tonight?” Ben asked Ada.

“It’ll take us a couple of hours to walk there.”

“Get some rest first,” Clarissa suggested. “Then we can all go join up with them.”

Tomas eyed Clarissa. “Somebody has to stay here.”

“That can be you, then,” she snapped. “I’m sick of staying in here.”

“Sounds fair to me,” Ben said. Tomas crossed his arms, but said nothing. Ben stretched his back as he started up the stairs. “Let’s get a little shut-eye.”

Ada joined him on the walk up the steps. Tomas and Clarissa followed.

Movement seemed to surprise Ben. As he tensed, Ada slipped into a defensive posture. But before she could ask what was going on, Clarissa gasped.

“Holy shit.”

LeFay was standing in a bathrobe by the food dispenser. “Good to see you, too,” she said.

“UHHH...” Clarissa stared at LeFay, shocked and slack-jawed. The cyborg she’d just spent God knew how long carrying around and trying to figure out how to reactivate was walking and talking as if nothing had happened.

“Where have you guys been?” LeFay asked as she flipped through the settings on the food dispenser. “Damn, guess we can’t just go to the store, eh? I’m starving.”

“You look,” started Ben. “Well, you look—”

“Like shit. I know. We can’t all be as pretty as you. Going toe-to-toe with homicidal aliens can do that to a gal.”

LeFay did look rough. Pieces of her skin were missing, exposing metal mesh underneath. One of her legs looked pretty mangled, pants hung on a robotic skeletal leg. “But I can do something about that. I’m just hungry and thirsty as hell.”

“Here.” Ada reached into her pack. From it she produced a couple bags of chips and a thermos full of water. She offered them to LeFay.

“Thank you, pretty lady.” LeFay took Ada up on her generous offer. Then she quickly ripped open and devoured both bags of chips, discarding the bags on the floor. She rapidly unscrewed the top of the thermos and downed the whole thing, some water spilling down her chin.

“Yeah, no problem.”

“So this is what’s left, huh?” LeFay wiped the water from her chin and looked at the rest of the group. “Only missing the ugly bastard?” She rubbed her chin. “Damn, I was starting to like the little prick. Still, not bad, all things considered. Not bad at all. If you guys will excuse me, I’m gonna step into the old surgery suite and fix myself up. Make a gal more presentable.”

With that, LeFay disappeared into the other room.

Clarissa stared after her, torn on what she should do. LeFay was being LeFay, which meant she was using her bluster to deflect everyone and everything. God help her if she ever openly needed anybody else to help her with anything. A goddamn island who didn’t need anyone, that was LeFay. She’d not looked Clarissa in the eye yet. She probably couldn’t bear the idea that she was now in her debt.

Well, get used to it, bitch. I just saved your life. Suck on that, miss ‘I don’t need anybody’.

Of course, LeFay had also saved Clarissa’s life. And in the saving of LeFay’s life, Clarissa had managed to deactivate her and slam her body into the side of a building.

Details.

In the end, Clarissa let LeFay go be by herself in the surgical room. She knew it wouldn’t be as easy as LeFay was trying to make it sound. If she’d just ask for help, Clarissa could do it much faster. But LeFay was stubborn, and that was that.

The others had put their weapons on the kitchen table, and sat down around it. Clarissa did the same.

“We have to find a way off-planet,” said Ada.

“And just leave these people behind to get slaughtered?” Tomas asked.

“Look, I’m not thrilled about that part either. But this planet, these people here, they’re as good as dead or turned. No matter how you look at it, Vassar-1 has fallen.”

“And they aren’t going to stop here,” Ben added.

“What do you mean?” Tomas started to take his gun apart so he could clean it.

“Their plans. They don’t stop here on Vassar-1. They’re just going to go from planet to planet, station to station, and take them all over.”

“And you know this how?” asked Ada.

“It’s hard to explain. You’ll just have to trust me.”

“No offense,” Ada said. “We all love you, but that sounds like something someone who can’t be trusted would say,” she added, half facetiously and half seriously.

“I don’t know how to explain it,” Ben said again.

“Try,” urged Tomas.

“He’s right,” Clarissa said. “I saw Engano’s reports. The AIC.” She hesitated. Even though it made no logical sense to care anymore, her training made it feel like a betrayal to discuss classified information. In the end, she couldn’t make herself talk details. She felt stupid for it. “The AIC has known for some time that the Oblivion plan concerned more than just Earth. We just assumed it would radiate outward from Earth. Not...” She hesitated again. “Not the other way around.”

“So you’re saying they’re planning on hitting Earth?”

Clarissa rubbed her temples. She suddenly felt sick. Was she really this bothered about this? It was like the act of discussing it was scrambling her brain.

“You okay there, Morgan?” asked Ada.

“Clarissa,” she snapped. She’d finally gotten the others to forget her cover name, and it bothered her to hear it again, even though she understood that Ada had just arrived. “Please call me Clarissa, and I’m fine. Really. Peachy.”

Clarissa looked around the table and saw concern in all the faces. “Trust me,” she said, then stood up. “Or trust Ben. I don’t care. Either way, he’s right. This is just the start. I’m gonna go check on LeFay.”

With that, she got up and left.

“OOOOKAY, WHAT WAS ALL THAT ABOUT?” asked Ada.

“Something’s not right with her,” Tomas said.

“We’ve all been through a lot,” Ben said. “Especially her.”

Ada accepted that. Anyone had the right to go a little unhinged after everything they’d been through. Though if she was being honest, seeing the usually pretty stoic Clarissa acting this way disturbed her. She could see that Tomas felt the same way.

“You know her better than me,” Ada said. Then she leaned forward, lowering her voice. She knew what Tomas was thinking, because she was thinking it too. “You’re sure she’s not Shapeless?”

Ben looked surprised. “Of course I’m sure,” he answered, a little too quickly for Ada’s liking.

“How can you be sure? Did you test her?”

“I did,” Ben said.

Ada glanced at Tomas. He crossed his arms. She turned back to Ben. “How?”

He looked offended. “What do you mean, how? The way we always have. With extreme temperatures. In the surgical room. I watched her working on LeFay with highly charged particles. High-heat lasers. Trust me. If she was Shapeless, she couldn’t do all that. You didn’t see how involved it all was. I mean, we were all pouring sweat up there.”

Ada frowned. “That’s not exactly the same—”

“What, you want me to just force her to take a test?”

“Yes,” roared Tomas. “You had no problem doing that to our people. Throwing them out of damned airlocks. Or have you forgotten about that?”

“That was different,” Ben said.

“How?”

“I knew Tanisha was Shapeless,” Ben said.

“*She* could be too!” Tomas bellowed, pointing at the other room.

“Shit, keep it down, Tomas,” Ada hissed. “I don’t think they heard you over on the *Atlas*.”

Tomas threw his hands up and sat back.

Ada decided to try a different tack. “So you haven’t seen anything that looked strange to you?” she asked Ben.

“I told you, we’re all stressed.”

“Because here’s the thing, Ben,” Ada said. “I’m just looking at this logically. She was kidnapped by them, she was up on that ship. They could’ve easily—”

“It’s her. Trust me.”

Tomas crossed his arms and jutted out his lip.

Ada sat back, searching the hardened features of Ben’s face. There was no doubt there, and no way to change his mind, at least not right now. Pointing out how comfortable Clarissa had been with playing her spy games under his nose would only make him dig in harder.

“Sure, Ben. Whatever you say.”

“HOW YA DOING THERE, CLAIRE?” LeFay asked casually as she heard Clarissa enter the surgery suite.

It instantly grated on Clarissa. LeFay could push anyone’s buttons in the best of times, and Clarissa was already in a bad mood, annoyed with her inability to discuss intel with the group in the other room.

What the hell was that all about, anyway?

“I’m fine,” Clarissa said dismissively. “How’d you...I spent days trying to figure out how to turn your core back on. How are you now awake, up and moving around?”

“I’m not a microwave or a toaster. You can’t just flip the switch and I turn right on. Needed to charge back up, let the power flow through every part.” LeFay controlled various mechanical arms around the surgery bed she sat up in. The arms did different things like replace her damaged skin, solder electronic pieces, and run diagnostics.

“You’ve gotten a lot more work done,” Clarissa said. “Since I last saw you.”

“It’s been a while since you saw me,” LeFay said.

“You look like more machine than woman at this point.”

“You sound like the rest of them now,” LeFay said dismissively. She didn’t have to explain who “the rest of them” were. It was everyone. It was always LeFay against everyone else.

“Ah.”

LeFay rolled her eyes. “They didn’t do anything. I did this to myself. Figured when the war eventually came home, I should be as souped up as possible. Become a fighting machine. The war came, but I was expecting

human beings in armor with guns, not shapeshifting aliens. If I'd known that, maybe I'd have changed my specs a bit."

Blake stood with his hands on his hips as he watched LeFay work. "She really is a crazy bitch," he said.

"That's not fair," Clarissa said.

"You stick up for her a lot," he noted with the slightest tinge of judgment.

"And?" LeFay asked. She waited for an answer. Clarissa realized she'd missed her question.

"What?"

"I said, 'And how are you?'"

"I told you already," Clarissa said. "I'm fine. As good as can be, you know?"

LeFay nodded. "You sure about that?"

Clarissa realized she was nervously fidgeting, and stopped. "What do you mean?"

Blake rolled his eyes at her, and she gave him a nasty look.

"C'mon, Claire. You've been talking to someone who isn't here ever since we got back."

Clarissa's head snapped back to LeFay. In the background, she saw Blake uncross his arms and take several steps forward, a look of concern on his face now. "How do you— What do you mean?"

Now it was LeFay's turn to roll her eyes. "As soon as you put that core in me, I was online. It might have taken my system several days to reintegrate, but as soon as I did, all the data was there. Everything."

Clarissa's gaze focused on the corner of the surgery suite. Blake had disappeared.

LeFay glanced over, then pantomime-whispered to Clarissa, "Are they over there right now?" She waved her hand back behind her head, a big smile on her face. "Am I getting close?"

Something about the fact that LeFay could turn even this into a joke enraged Clarissa. "It's not funny," she said. "And no."

"So who is it, nutcase? Or is this just your imaginary friend from when you were a teenager all over again?"

"I was four!" Clarissa snapped.

"Sure you were," LeFay said.

“It’s Blake!” she shouted, feeling her cheeks burning. “It’s my dead husband!”

LeFay’s smile disappeared.

“I’m seeing my dead goddamn husband,” Clarissa said again. She felt tears on her cheeks, and it just made her angrier. “Is that funny enough for you?”

“Shit,” LeFay said.

“That’s all you have to say?” Clarissa asked.

“Really shit,” offered LeFay.

Clarissa blew out her cheeks. “Why do I bother?”

“That’s damn interesting,” LeFay said. “Do you hear him all the time?”

“No.”

“When did this start? On Earth?” LeFay shook her head. “Does everyone on Earth hear ghosts? Must be all the pollution.”

“God, you’re a bitch,” Clarissa said, wiping her tears away. “And no, it wasn’t Earth. It was those creepy alien bastards on that ship.”

At that, LeFay sat forward. “No shit?”

Clarissa was instantly uncomfortable. Seeing LeFay taking something seriously was unnerving. “I don’t know how to describe it. They reached into my mind, made me relive my memories.” She shook her head. “Really bad memories. Ever since, I’ve been hearing him. It’s like they imported him, or the memory of him, into me.”

LeFay rubbed her chin. “Here’s the real question. Does he try and make you do anything?”

“Like what?”

“Anything you wouldn’t do otherwise?”

“Not that I can think of,” Clarissa said. “If I’m being honest, it’s ... kinda nice to have him there.”

Clarissa meant it. His spectral comfort had helped her survive out on the streets of the city, and escape the Shapeless and cultists. “Not sure I’d have dragged your ass all the way here without his encouragement.”

“Well, I never met your better half in that arranged marriage the AIC put you in, but he sounds nice.”

Clarissa rolled her eyes, knowing how little LeFay cared for the institution. “Lots of agents were like that.”

“You seem to have gone with it. A real family gal.”

Clarissa sighed. “I suppose I did.”

“And the girls? Do you hear them?”

Clarissa was silent, but her lip must have trembled.

“My bad,” LeFay said, hands raised. “Really, that’s on me. I just figured you might see them, too.”

“God, you’re a bitch, LeFay.”

“SO WHAT’S THE PLAN, THEN?” Tomas asked.

“We need to get to UEF space,” Ben said. “I still know some people in the military. I can warn them of what’s coming.”

“And then what?” Ada asked. “Just leave the AIC to the Shapeless?”

“They aren’t going to spread to other planets in AIC space. Not yet, at least.”

“What makes you so sure? If you want us to trust you and go with your plan, you need to tell us what you’re hiding.”

Ben took a deep breath then exhaled slowly. “Okay, so, where do I start? Back when I was on Earth, before the *Atlas* launched and there were those terrorist attacks on Annapolis. Wait, I should probably....before the attacks. I was on my way to my parents’ place. They were having a party for my old man. They wanted to celebrate the launch of his historic mission on a historic ship. I was running late because I’d had a...a long night.

“Anyway, I was running late, decided to take the mag rail from my apartment to the Naval Base and my parents. But before I got there, I was stopped by an Oblivion cultist. At least, he looked like one. He gave me a hyper drive. At the time I didn’t think anything of it. But turns out...” Ben shook his head.

“What was on it?” Tomas asked as he cleaned the barrel of his rifle.

“It was a conversation, a series of communications back and forth between someone from the UEF and the AIC.”

“Who?” Ada asked.

“I’m not sure, but they were sharing information back and forth. They knew about the Shapeless, though they just referred to them as the Oblivion does, as the ‘saviors’. These two, they knew that the Shapeless were coming. They knew that they’d strike both Vassar-1 and Earth. They knew their plans. At least, that’s what it read like.”

“What do they want? Or what did these two sources say they wanted?”

“They want the total devastation of humankind, and to replace them. Apparently these two sources on the hyper drive were going to try and negotiate with the aliens, find some way to spare a planet for survivors to live on.”

“Negotiating with these things seems a bit ... far-fetched,” Tomas said.

“No kidding,” Ben said. “I truly don’t think they realized what they were up against.”

“I still don’t understand what these aliens are doing in the first place,” Ada said. “Why not just wipe us out and have that be that? Why try and replace us?”

“I dunno,” Ben said. “As far as I can tell, nobody does. But it all started with the *Atlas*. In the documents on the drive, it was clear that they wanted the weapon that was on the *Atlas*. I’m not entirely sure what that weapon was; only my dad and maybe a few generals and the Prime Minister knew what that was. But the drive had the location on the ship, and it suggested that it was a planet killer.” Ben hesitated. “And that part, at least, I can confirm. ‘Planet killer’ wasn’t a term my father ever used, but others did.”

“Well, they pretty faithfully recreated the *Atlas*,” Ada said. “So they must have it.”

“Maybe, maybe not,” Ben said.

“It’s a wreck now,” Tomas said.

“You saw what they were using it for on those people,” Ada snapped. “I think these aliens are pretty good at turning lemons into lemonade. Hell, for all we know, they planned to put it down on the planet’s surface anyway. Maybe we just sped it up.”

Ben was silent for a moment while he digested that thought. Had everything he and the others done only hastened the Shapeless’ plan? It felt like a rock had landed in the pit of his stomach. He tried to shake it off and continue.

“Whatever the case with the *Atlas*, it seems the assumption of the men on the drive was that the Shapeless weren’t going to take over every planet in human-occupied space, not at first. First they wanted to sow seeds of discontent between the UEF and AIC.”

“That’s not much of a challenge,” Tomas said.

“Once they ramped up the fighting, they’d take over key colonies.” Ben shrugged. “Then they’d destroy the other planets instead of trying to turn

them.”

“Is that really what they said?” Tomas asked, sounding incredulous.

“I filled in some blanks, but it makes sense. It’s what I’d do if I was an evil genocidal shapeshifting alien. My only issue is whether or not they actually got this mystery weapon from the *Atlas*. When we saw her, she was pretty totaled. Without that, I don’t what else they could use.”

“They have another option,” Clarissa said.

The others turned to her. “How’s LeFay?” Ada asked.

“She’s fine.”

“What’s this other option?” Ben asked.

“The AIC had one of those planet killers themselves. That’s why they abducted me, I think. To try and find out where it is.”

“And do you know where it is?” asked Ada.

Clarissa crossed her arms. “I do. And it’s closer to Earth than you’d think.”

“Where?” Ben asked.

Clarissa’s eye twitched. “Europa,” she croaked out before a coughing fit overcame her.

“Europa?” Tomas asked incredulously. “That’s a constant battlefield! I can’t believe the AIC would hide anything so important on that disaster of a planet.”

“Ballsy,” Ada said.

“Stupid,” said Tomas. For the duration of the war between the two factions, Jupiter’s most hospitable moon had been in a never-ending stalemate that had cost both sides several million lives.

“No wonder those bastards refuse to surrender,” Ben said. He thought back to his time on Europa, as well as his father’s time there.

“So with all this new info, what’s the plan? Because we need to make some moves,” Ada said.

Ben sat back, an idea forming in his head. He just needed to talk it out of there, as his old man would say. “First things first. We need to raid that assimilation center at the *Atlas*.”

Tomas frowned. “Why?”

“In case there are others on this planet that know about the AIC’s planet killer.”

Ada nodded agreement. “Plus we can check to see if the fake *Atlas* had the UEF’s planet killer as well.” She stood up, effectively ending the

meeting. “We need to rendezvous with my other group first. Get more manpower. Probably going to need as many people as we can get.”

“Agreed,” Ben said. “Once we do that, and hopefully all make it out alive, we need a ride off-planet. We need to make it out of AIC space to Europa first, then Earth.”

“The bunker is totaled, so that cruiser is out of the question,” Tomas said.

Ben shook his head. “If we don’t have a ride off this rock, we can’t go blowing things up.” He tried to think of a way to get off Vassar-1.

“I got a ride,” said LeFay.

Ben turned to see her leaning against the doorframe, looking remarkably better than the last time he’d seen her. “You clean up decent for a cyborg,” he said.

“So do you, pretty boy.”

“You have a ride?” Tomas asked. “Where? I know damn well there isn’t one on the roof.”

“Don’t worry about it, big boy. I’ll take you guys there.”

“Why can’t you just tell us?”

“You can’t find your way off this block without a map,” LeFay said. “So how can I explain it to you?”

Ben grunted. “So it’s far from here?”

“It should be,” Clarissa said. “Otherwise it would be toast.”

“But first we gotta hit that assimilation center, huh?” LeFay asked. “I’m in.”

“Good,” Ada said, hands on hips. “Five hours. Everyone rest, try to get some sleep.”

Ben stood with her. “Five hours from now we get out of here,” he said. “And then we get off this damn planet.”

“Amen,” Tomas said. “I’m going to bed.”

FIVE

FAILURE

DUCAR STOOD outside the same train station that Vesta and a handful of other zealots had chased Clarissa into. “And she never came back up?”

“None of them did,” answered one of the zealots. He’d been aboard the ship that had dropped them off.

Ducar’s grip tightened on the submachine gun in his hands. He tried his best to hide his anger, but it was hard. The Oblivion not only gave him purpose, but also sparked a passion inside him that could easily turn to rage. “I don’t care about the others,” he said.

“Yes, sir.”

“And you haven’t heard from her since?”

“No sir, we haven’t. We tried to raise her on her HUD, but...”

“Did you go down there and try to find her?”

The cultist pilot looked a little panicked. He knew that he hadn’t, and was afraid of Ducar’s reaction when he told him so. It was funny how, even clad in his body armor, face fiercely painted with blood and armed to the teeth, he could still be and look so scared.

“No, you didn’t, did you? You just left her and the others to their fate, didn’t even back them up.”

Ducar didn’t give the pilot time to answer. He walked into the train station. Two other zealots followed him in. The pilot tried to stay behind.

Ducar stopped, turned around, and looked at the nervous pilot. “What are you waiting for? Come. We need to find our brothers and sisters.”

Glass cracked and scraped under Ducar and his fellow zealots’ feet as they traversed the train station. Without any witnesses to guide them, he had

to use what remained of his city sentinel skills to help him track down where his Vesta and Clarissa had gone.

“Sir! Empty cartridges.” One of Ducar’s zealots knelt down and sifted through the shards of glass with gloved hands. He picked up a couple of spent bullet casings.

Ducar went over to his man and took a spent cartridge from him. He smelled it. The aroma of gunpowder still lingered on the metal. They’d been just recently fired.

“We have to follow the trail of bullets,” Ducar said aloud to no one in particular. He kept his eyes on the ground as he did exactly that. The trail of bullet casings led him just outside the entrance to the Vassar-1 Gold Line. He took out his flashlight and shined it on the archway that served as that entrance; he didn’t see anything at first, but he had to keep looking.

“You three, with me.” Ducar attached his flashlight to his submachine gun, snapping it on easily right below the barrel.

His boots hit the gravel around and under the subway tracks. They made a crunching sound that echoed throughout the tunnel, rocks rubbing together. It wasn’t just his footsteps; the two zealots that came with him and the pilot that brought up the rear made just as much noise.

“Vesta!” Ducar called out in the darkness. He hated himself for feeling what he felt: worry, sadness, and the bitterness of bile rising in his soul.

He was worried that he’d find what he expected. The Oblivion had taught Ducar that the death of a human being was in no way a loss. It shouldn’t be mourned or avoided, but promoted and celebrated, because in death a person became one with the Abyss and experienced everlasting peace. Their memory, their visage, the person they were, would continue in the waking world as a better Shapeless version of themselves. So why mourn?

With all that said, Ducar dreaded finding his only friend and companion dead. Vesta was the only person that got him on any level. Though love was strictly forbidden in the Oblivion, he thought he loved her, as much as a broken man such as himself could.

“Stop!” Ducar halted his fellow zealots. In the near distance, he saw a body lying across the train tracks. It was a man’s body. From the wounds and the amount of blood, it was clear that zealot had been cut up with a knife.

And he wasn’t alone.

Another body was quickly found. There were more bullet casings, and the displacement of the gravel around them showed that there had been a fight. Ducar determined that Clarissa must've had the advantage. He remembered the Pale Man and the Shapeless examining her after her capture; she had artificial eyes, so it didn't take much for him to put things together and realize that she'd ambushed the zealots in the dark—had used her night vision as the advantage and pretty much slaughtered them.

Vesta should've known that Clarissa could see in the dark just as easily as in afternoon daylight. Had she forgotten? Ducar couldn't understand why she'd walk into such a situation, where she was at a clear disadvantage against a cornered animal.

That confusion just intensified when he saw her body. Lit up by Ducar's flashlight, Vesta lay dead on the subway tunnel's floor.

One of her hands held in her spilled guts, now cold, bulging through her fingers. She had several more cuts on her body. Clarissa had made her suffer. That only angered Ducar more.

He kept his back to his men. He didn't want them to see him cry as he saw Vesta's face, devoid of life, turning blue under the blood face paint. Part of him was disgusted with himself.

The pilot slowly walked up from behind. "Sir? Is she—"

Ducar calmly spun around and put one perfectly placed bullet into his forehead, taking a chunk of skull and paint off. Angry and determined to make Clarissa pay for what she'd done, he wiped his tears and stood up straight.

"Sir?" asked one of the other zealots.

"We follow these tracks. See where they take us. None of us go home until we find this ... *person* ... and put them down. Understood?" Ducar's bloodshot eyes trembled with barely contained rage.

"I know where they lead."

Ducar turned toward the deep, unfamiliar voice. It had come from the darkest part of the tunnel. His light shined on what looked like a man, at first.

Lee Saito, wearing a partially open button-down shirt, slowly walked toward him.

Ducar lowered his light. "Sir," he said. He knew who Lee was, even if he'd never met him directly. Still, he was surprised to see him. The last he'd heard, the fabled Captain Saito, commander of the UEF *Atlas* and war hero,

was still in the process of being turned. But it looked like that process was now complete.

“Ducar,” Saito said. “Is that right?” He looked at Ducar with eyes clouded by a black, oily, moving substance.

“That’s right, sir.”

“We have orders, Ducar. You’re to follow me. Follow me, and we’ll find them.”

“Orders from whom?” Ducar asked. He was happy to go hunting for Clarissa, but he was skeptical of Saito. He’d never met him before, and he knew from personal experience that the turning process wasn’t always instant.

Saito unfastened the remaining buttons of his shirt, revealing the churning black liquid that had replaced most of his stomach. A face appeared and emerged from it. It was the Pale Man’s face, made from that oily onyx substance.

The Pale Man’s face gave the instructions. “Orders from me, Ducar. Follow Mr. Saito. He’s in charge now, until I recover. Follow his orders as you would mine, son.”

Though it was certainly odd for Ducar to take orders from a face protruding from a man’s belly, he obeyed. After all, it was the Pale Man who’d showed him the way.

“Understood,” Ducar said. He took one last look at Vesta. The only person he cared about had died painfully, slowly, and desperately. He wouldn’t forget. Ever.

Deep down, in the last vestige of light in him that was now extinguished and merely smoking, he felt bad for Clarissa for what he planned on doing to her when he found her.

SIX

BATTLE PLANS

BEN LOOKED at the assembled survivors that Ada had saved—or that had saved each other, as Ada insisted. There were a priest, a couple of able-bodied men of fighting age, and an older woman looking after a couple of kids.

LeFay whistled softly to herself. “This is it, huh?”

Ada crossed her arms, looking annoyed. “This is it,” she said. “Good people.”

“No doubt,” LeFay said. She shrugged. “Well, your first little band of orphans didn’t look too impressive to me, and look how that turned out.”

Tomas flipped her off. The survivors were still in shock from Ada’s relaying of what had happened to the others who’d gone with her to investigate the assimilation center at the downed *Atlas*, and didn’t seem particularly bothered with LeFay’s assessment.

“I don’t know about this,” Tomas murmured. “How many of them can actually fight, Ada?”

Ben shared his sentiment. The last thing they needed now was dead weight.

“We’ve lost friends too, you know,” said the priest. His name was Father Eran, and it seemed he had better hearing than Ben gave him credit for.

Tomas grimaced. “I don’t mean to imply—”

“We’ve lost family,” Eran said, “and we’re not about to just sit here and hope that you come back. Because people rarely do.”

“You’re going to fight, Father?” LeFay asked. Her question seemed more genuine than mocking, which was a surprise, coming from her. Ben

was pretty sure that LeFay wasn't the religious type.

"I'm going to contribute. We all are."

"No," Ada said, shaking her head. "Not all of you can. If you want to come, Father, that's fine." She pointed at the two men in fighting shape. "Perry and Reinholdt, you can come too, but that's it. Meryl stays here with the kids. One of us will stay back here with you to help you out."

"No," Meryl said.

"Going the child soldier route?" LeFay said sarcastically. "Bold move." She wasn't the family type either, Ben decided. Truth be told, she didn't seem to be the anything type.

"I mean nobody is staying behind with us," Meryl said caustically to LeFay. The old woman clearly wasn't one to suffer her jabs quietly. "You need everyone with you."

"What will you do if those bald sons of bitches, or worse, those damn aliens, come knocking?" asked Ada.

"I'm going to lock us in the basement, and you'll come get us when you're done." Meryl crossed her arms defiantly.

To Ben's surprise, Ada shrugged it off. Something about Meryl's demeanor told him that Ada and the elderly woman had locked horns before. "Fine, Meryl. You've clearly made up your mind. But I need you to understand that we might not make it back. And in that case..."

Ada's words faded away as Ben tuned her out and considered the new additions to their raiding party. To say that he wasn't confident in them was an understatement. Perry and Reinholdt looked like eager puppies. They had no idea what was coming. And the Father, well, he had a heaviness in his sunken eyes that didn't strike Ben as typical of a religious figure coping well with an alien invasion.

Not that Ben thought any of them were coping that well. Clarissa seemed better, but her strange behavior was still worrisome. Ada had developed a hard edge that seemed to be a permanent part of her personality now. Tomas had a violence behind his eyes that made Ben uneasy. Only LeFay seemed like her usual self, but he wasn't sure if that was a good thing or not.

And what about you?

"I'm assuming you have weapons here," Tomas said, "because we don't have much left. At least, not that we aren't already using."

“Weapons we have,” Ada said. “Reinholdt, go help Tomas grab all the guns, grenades, and everything we’ve got.”

“You haven’t told us what we’re doing yet,” said Father Eran.

“We’re running a raid on the Shapeless,” LeFay said. “Gonna try and save some people, and also blow some shit up. You game, white collar?”

If she’d hoped to get a rise out of the priest, she was disappointed. “I believe I am,” he said calmly.

LeFay nodded, seemingly impressed. “No worries what the big guy upstairs will think when the killing starts?”

“Don’t be stupid,” Eran said evenly, taking a rifle from Tomas with practiced hands. “God clearly doesn’t care about this place, or anything that goes on here.”

THE PLAN WAS simple to a fault, but Ada thought it was their best option, considering this wasn’t a group that could be coordinated like some precise military team.

Ada would lead her people in a frontal assault on the *Atlas*. They’d be nothing more than a distraction that hopefully didn’t get squashed. While they did that, Ben, Tomas, and LeFay would infiltrate the ship, plant explosives, and finish the job.

Because she just didn’t trust Clarissa to have her head in the game, or indeed trust her at all, Ada had insisted on bringing Clarissa along with her group. She’d acquiesced, but clearly didn’t like leaving LeFay. They seemed to have rekindled whatever old bond they’d once had.

Leaving Ben with his short temper and Tomas with his itchy trigger finger together wasn’t ideal, but along with LeFay, she trusted them to better coordinate themselves than the others. And her group needed her to keep them from getting dead...hopefully.

To get to the *Atlas*, the group snaked through the Vassar-1 streets. Getting there undetected was difficult, but most of Ada’s group knew the city well. It made for a slow trip, but they managed to get to a bombed-out apartment building’s parking lot, where they’d make final preparations, then go their separate ways.

“I really wish we had more weapons,” said Clarissa as she took stock of what the little raiding party had.

Tomas glanced around at the weapons everybody was holding. “Looks decent.”

“Against cultists,” Clarissa said. “Not against Shapeless.”

“We each have a mag of incendiary rounds from the bunker,” Ada said, “and I have a homemade flamethrower. It doesn’t have much fuel, but it’s enough if we get into a jam. Each of us have a couple of white phosphorous grenades, which helps.”

“Impressive.”

“We raided a military depot,” Father Eran said. “Ada informed us what kinds of weapons we’d need.”

“I have a cold caster and a few flares,” Clarissa said, “in case we need to make a quick getaway.”

“But you still want more, huh?” Ben said.

“Can’t have enough,” Clarissa said.

“No argument there,” Ada said. She actually liked what she was hearing. It wasn’t the ideal weapons to have, but beggars couldn’t be choosers, and they were better stocked than they had been in earlier fights with the Shapeless.

“And I have a whole shit ton of explosives,” LeFay added.

Tomas glanced over at her. “I’m afraid to ask where.”

“Everywhere,” she said with a wink.

“Way too many for any sane individual to carry on their person,” added Clarissa.

“That’s subjective,” LeFay said. “I think it’s perfect.”

“Good. Good. Okay.” Ben glanced at Ada and nodded at her.

She nodded back. “Go time,” she said.

“Go time,” Ben agreed. “We’ll wait for your signal. Soon as the bullets start flying, we’ll sneak inside. Give us about twenty minutes, okay?”

He was already on the move, with LeFay and Tomas in his wake. Ada watched them go when a thought occurred to her. She blurted out, “What if you run into your dad?” and then immediately regretted it. Not because it wasn’t a good point—he was going to be there, she was sure of it—but because she’d seemingly sprung it on Ben like a trap.

Ben faltered a bit in his gait, but recovered. “Then I deal with it.”

“And what if we run into him?” Clarissa asked.

“You should probably run,” Ben said. “But you do what you have to do. He’s not...*that’s* not my father. Not really.”

“So if one of us kills him, no hard feelings?” LeFay said with a dark smirk. “Because your old man and I have some unfinished business.”

“Wait...who’s your father?” asked Reinholdt.

“Don’t worry about it,” Ada and a couple of others said in unison.

“Okay, shit.” Reinholdt backed up, hands in the air in a surrender pose. “Sorry I asked.”

Ben turned and continued toward the pile of rubble that hid them from the open space created by the *Atlas*’ crash. Ada knew what was on the other side. It was the same as when they saw it from above: poor civilians lined up for the slaughter, cultists guarding and herding them.

“We’ll meet back here in this garage and watch that damn ship blow up,” Ben said over his shoulder. “Good?” There was no waiting for an answer. “Good.”

“Try to not get dead,” Ada said.

Ben stopped and looked back at her. “I’ll try if you do.”

“It’s a deal.”

SEVEN

DISTRACTIONS

ADA WAITED a good half hour with her group, after the others had disappeared into the rubble and ruin of Vassar-1.

She waited until she couldn't stand it anymore. She had to trust that they'd found their way inside and were well on their way to planting those explosives by now. The others were fidgety, except for Clarissa, who appeared to be lost in her thoughts.

"It's time," Ada said.

Clarissa stood up. The others hesitated.

"If anyone wants to back out, now's the time," Ada said. "I won't judge you. But this is your last chance."

Clarissa cracked her knuckles. "I'll judge the shit out of you. Let's go to work."

The others slowly stood.

"On me," Ada said as she led them out of the parking garage ruins, careful to stay out of sight. Clarissa took up the rear, and Ada had the distinct impression she wanted to shoot anyone who tried to bail.

Then again, she could be just positioning herself to turn on them when the fighting started. Ada wasn't sure.

They had to take a circuitous route, so that their pathway couldn't be tracked back to the rendezvous point with Ben's group after the job was done. They finally reached a series of concrete barriers that Ada had spotted on her last trip here. Since they were still erect, they could serve as cover in the imminent fight. Up close, however, the barriers were far more pockmarked and brittle than she expected, but better than nothing.

While the others made their way behind the barriers, Perry diverted around them. His job was a dangerous one, but Ada wasn't surprised that he'd volunteered for it. Like far too many on Vassar-1, he'd lost everything—his family, his wife, basically his entire life—when the aliens had arrived.

When Ada signaled the path was clear, or at least as clear as she could truthfully determine from her vantage point, Perry quietly made his way out about fifty yards from the barriers. He had to move slowly. He carried a charged hoverbike fuel cell. The corrosive, combustible liquid inside was heavy even for a big man like Perry.

"C'mon, c'mon, hurry up, Perry," whispered Ada as she watched his snail pace. Finally, he stopped and took the cell from his back. He slowly began pouring out the fuel in a ring that, if lit, would create a burning wall of fire that would hopefully stop any enemy advancing on the group's position.

"This is taking too long," Clarissa whispered as she came up next to Ada.

"You're telling me."

Clarissa scanned with those artificial eyes Ada was so jealous of. "But so far so good," she said, then stopped scanning. "Wait. Shit." She pointed. "Over there."

Ada saw a group of cultists guarding and herding the line of innocent civilians being led into the *Atlas*. They looked alarmed. Two of them had turned their attention away from the line; they seemed to be signaling for others. A cluster of cultists was quickly forming. "Think they saw Perry?"

"Either that, or Ben's group inside the ship. Either way..." Clarissa shrugged, as if the next step were obvious.

And it was.

Considering no one was firing at Perry, Ada was sure it had to be the group inside the *Atlas*. But in heading toward the ship, they were going to stumble on Perry soon. And since the whole point of her party was to provide a distraction in case anything like that happened, it was time to start getting attention.

"Here we go," Ada said. She shot a flare high over Perry's head, in the general direction of the cultist guards.

Perry froze.

"Move, asshole!" Ada shouted. He finally seemed to get the point. He dropped the fuel cell where he stood and began running back to the barriers.

Ada opened fire: not with her limited incendiary rounds, but with standard high-velocity bullets. Immediately she took half of a clueless cultist's head off.

Just like that, the clearing erupted with gunfire. The cultists fired back at Ada, Clarissa, and Reinholdt, who joined in the fight.

Perry ran like a drunk man, ducking and weaving as he went. He stumbled forward, diving at the last to crawl behind the forwardmost of the concrete barriers. He rolled over and gave a thumbs up to Father Eran, who threw a rifle to him.

Or rather, he tried. It bounced a few feet short, and Ada could imagine the gun going off and killing one of them. Perry winced, but once the gun stopped bouncing around like a gutted fish, he crawled out from behind his barrier and grabbed it.

He'd just gotten back behind the barrier, and Ada had just wondered how bad a shot the cultists were, when the barrier collapsed. She wasn't sure what caused it. Maybe the cultists had fired a grenade at it. Maybe it had just fallen over under the force of concentrated gunfire.

"Down!" Ada screamed, jumping up on her knee and giving as much cover as she could. The others did the same. But Perry, no doubt dazed from the impact of the barrier at least partially falling over him, climbed to his knees as he shoved a portion of concrete off his legs.

A pair of rounds sliced into his back and ripped through his unprotected chest. Perry grunted as he somehow managed to take two steps before a third round pierced the back of his head. He fell forward among the concrete rubble.

Shit. Another one gone just like that.

"Watch them!" Clarissa screamed at Ada, forcing her to tear her eyes away from Perry. "They're trying to flank us!"

Several cultists, having pinpointed her group's location, began running at them from both the left and the right.

"I see 'em!" Ada said. She controlled her breathing as she looked down the iron sights of her rifle, and waited until the cultists entered its view. With calm and ease she squeezed off a couple of rounds, killing the cultists coming from their left.

Ada knew she didn't quite have the same fire discipline as Clarissa. Instead of individual semi-automatic type shots, she opted for bursts of gunfire. Some bullets hit the ground around the running, advancing cultists,

kicking up dirt, dust, and pieces of rock and cement. The other shots, the ones that hit their marks, caused the cultists to tumble to the ground dead.

Things were going well at first. Despite losing Perry, Ada's group was causing far more damage than they took. Cultists were dropping like flies as they tried to rush them over open ground with no cover. The crash clearing was alight with super-heated high-velocity rounds, going back and forth as deadly orange and red streaks in the air.

"Reloading!" Ada ducked back behind the thick concrete barrier. From the safe side, she could hear the sound of bullets hitting her cover. It was a sharp, cracking noise that could easily unnerve the uninitiated, but at this point, there wasn't much that could still shake her.

That was when she noticed Father Eran.

He hid behind the barrier, a rifle clutched close to his chest. He mumbled something to himself. Upon paying a little more attention, Ada realized that he was praying. She ducked her head down as a bullet hit the top of the concrete barrier above her. It skipped off and sent shrapnel everywhere. "We need all the help we can get!" she shouted in his direction.

"God forgive me," mumbled Father Eran to himself. He took a deep breath and disengaged his gun's safety. Then he got up to one knee, placing the firearm on top of the barrier for extra support. Within seconds, a super-heated bullet burst through his front teeth and exited out the back of his head. He was gone before he even got the chance to fire one round.

Ada couldn't believe it. She looked dumbfounded at Father Eran's slumped-over body. What was left of his face was resting in his own blood on top of the concrete barrier. That was another one she'd lost, another face to add to the growing gallery of the dead in her mind.

"Ada!" Clarissa shouted. "Stay with me!"

Ada couldn't stop looking at the crumpled body of the priest. She wanted to stop; she just couldn't. Her rifle hung limp in her hands.

Then something smashed hard into her back. Her neck snapped hard as pain radiated out from between her shoulder blades. She somehow managed to hang on to her rifle.

Ada turned to find Clarissa had slammed the butt of her rifle into her back. "Wake up, goddamn it!" Clarissa said. "We have a really big problem! Literally!"

Clarissa nodded up and over their barrier. Ada slowly raised up, still feeling pain from her back. She expected to see another wave of cultists, or

maybe a group of Shapeless.

Instead, she saw a fifteen-foot-tall mass of flesh, muscle, and bone lumbering across the clearing. It was loosely humanoid in form, but it was like no creature she'd ever seen.

Other Shapeless, screeching and angry, ran straight to their larger kin. They didn't care what was in their way, be it cultists or innocents in line for the assimilation center; they cut through anything in their path. As Ada watched, a pair of them reached it and simply jumped onto it. Their bodies melted right into it. Two more did the same, then another two. The creature grew bigger each time.

"What in holy hell is that thing?" asked Reinholdt. He'd stopped firing, and just looked on in awe at the hulking abomination.

"Whatever it is, we're gonna kill it," Ada said. She readied her flare gun and waited for the gigantic bastard to get closer to the ring of hoverbike fuel Perry had set up.

"Way ahead of you," Clarissa said. She'd already loaded in her incendiary rounds. She got into firing position on one knee, rifle butt rested against her shoulder, and started to shoot. Each round was aimed roughly at what passed for the monster's head.

As Clarissa and Reinholdt's incendiary rounds lit up the Shapeless abomination, it slowed, but it kept lumbering forward. Cultists were scooped up by the monster's tendrils and absorbed into its body. With each person it absorbed, parts of it protruded, then engulfed and snuffed out any flames on it.

"Your turn," Clarissa said.

"We need it to get closer," Ada said.

Clarissa was out of incendiary rounds. "I think that won't be a problem." She hesitated. "You want me to, uh, you know?"

"No," Ada said. "I got it."

Do I? I'm a good shot, but Ms. Special Agent is a better one.

"What are you waiting for?" Reinholdt shouted, his voice taking on an edge of hysteria.

"Just a little..." Ada watched as the Shapeless abomination kept coming. Its roar was so loud that it made her teeth rattle. In a couple of steps it would be in the perfect position. She aimed the flare gun.

"Ada?" Clarissa calmly aimed her reloaded rifle at the monster, nothing but traditional rounds left.

Now.

Ada fired. The flare streaked through the air, spitting fire as it went. The creature seemed to recognize the threat it represented, even if it was just a small burning flare. It stopped and watched as it landed at its feet.

Nothing happened. Ada stared in shock. The flare had slammed into a clump of grass just in front of the line of hoverbike fuel.

The creature roared and took another step.

Then Clarissa fired.

Her bullet sent dirt and rock flying up in the air right in front of the hot flare. It flipped up in the air, then landed again, in the middle of the fuel.

The fuel exploded. The creature was instantly engulfed in flames that seemed to grow in intensity by the second.

The creature screeched like a wounded animal and turned in a circle, wildly trying to find a way out of the burning curtain of flame. But it was only a few seconds before its whole body was on fire.

“Good shot,” Clarissa said to Ada, without a hint of sarcasm.

Ada swallowed, her throat suddenly incredibly dry. “You too,” she said, trying to reflect Clarissa’s nonchalance.

The creature had fallen over. It was writhing now as it crawled on all fours, but it seemed to have finally gotten its bearings enough to crawl out of the flaming fuel. It was clearly dying, a melting ball of blackened and charred organic material.

Reinholdt sprang to his feet. “That’s it, you son of a bitch! Burn! Burn, motherfu—”

The creature thrust one of its tree-trunk sized tendrils forward so fast that there was no time to react.

The tendril easily broke through the concrete barrier and impaled Reinholdt. Blood exploded out of his mouth, splattering across the broken pieces of the crumbling barrier he’d been standing front of.

Clarissa fired a steady stream of bullets into the tendril. It collapsed to the ground and fell still, along with the rest of the creature. The thrust was its dying act.

“Reinholdt!” Ada screamed as she ran to him. He held the tip of the still-burning tendril that had stabbed him through the belly.

“I’m okay,” Reinholdt said in a weak voice. He tried to say more, but blood started to pour out of his mouth. His head drooped, and he collapsed to the ground.

Ada stood over him, the last of her group out here. They were all gone. A day ago, they'd been holding hands as they buried a little girl. Now they were all dead.

And there sure as hell weren't going to be any more burials for anyone.

Ada felt tears on her cheeks. Grief. Frustration. Anger. Helplessness. Their blood stained her hands with a shame she could never wash off.

The staccato sound of Clarissa's rifle slowly brought her back to the here and now. Ada crawled back to join her.

"We still got problems," Clarissa said by way of a welcome.

The charred remains of the creature looked like it had exploded from the inside out. A handful of Shapeless rushed straight towards Clarissa and Ada.

"Ada, I'd say it's time to get the hell out of here," Clarissa said.

"Very much agreed," Ada said. She took one last look, then followed Clarissa up into the rubble behind them. About halfway up, the ground shook, and Ada stumbled forward as an ear-splitting explosion pierced the silence.

Ada looked back to watch the remains of the *Atlas* blow up. Following the initial detonation, there were several more near the engines. The blast wave sent the pursing Shapeless flying, but it sent Ada flying too. She lost track of Clarissa as she was sent up and over the rubble, tumbling well down the back side, cutting her knees and elbows as she went.

Clarissa somehow ended up right next to her, looking as bad as she did. Ada's head was ringing.

"That was ... big," Clarissa offered.

Ada just stared back at the black clouds billowing upward in the evening sky.

She knew the goal was to blow up the remains of the *Atlas*, but she hadn't known quite how many explosives were going to be used. Whatever idea she'd had, she hadn't guessed that much.

I hope they made it out okay.

Clarissa had already started to make her way back up the rubble. Ada did the same.

The scene on the other side was devastating. Between the initial blast wave and the resulting fires, mutilated bodies littered the clearing. Innocent civilians, cultists, and even Shapeless were all thrown together.

“That’s a lot of collateral damage,” Clarissa said. She didn’t seem to be talking to Ada, but Ada agreed. It was overwhelming.

She tried to remind herself they were stopping a greater evil, but it was hard to feel in that moment, looking at the blood-soaked clearing below, that it had been worth it.

“That explosion and that plume of black smoke,” Clarissa said, shaking her head up at the sky. “It’s like lighting a signal fire.” She looked at Ada. “There are still a damn lot of those things in the city. They’re gonna come running.”

Ada agreed. “Let’s get back to the parking garage. We have to regroup with the others.”

“If they made it,” Clarissa said, sounding doubtful.

Something about the nonchalant way she said it bothered Ada. Or maybe it was the way she seemed to be saying it to another person that wasn’t there.

When they got to the rendezvous location, they waited together in silence. Clarissa continued to stare off into the distance, nodding periodically. Finally, Ada couldn’t take it. “What is wrong with you?”

Clarissa looked over as though she’d interrupted her. “How long you got?”

She was kidding, but Ada spread her hands. “Anything is better than sitting here and expecting the worst,” she said honestly.

“They’re coming,” Clarissa said. “Stay positive.”

“Now I know you’re deflecting,” Ada said. “So what is it? What’s going on with you?”

Clarissa shook her head and looked off in the distance. “You wouldn’t believe me.”

“Try me.”

Clarissa turned to Ada and looked deep into her eyes. Ada could see the slightest shifting of the artificial irises. More than that, she could tell that Clarissa was genuinely struggling with whether to tell her or not.

Ada waited patiently. For once, all she had was time.

EIGHT

BLOWING STUFF UP

LEFAY WAS ABOUT AS EXCITED to be stuck with Tomas and Ben as she'd been with Tomas and Ace, but at least Ace had been fun. Now she had Tomas, her favorite ex-Special Forces man with no sense of humor, paired with Ben, a wanna-be tough guy with daddy issues.

Not LeFay's ideal threesome companions, but she'd had worse.

"Do either of you spunk monkeys know where you're going?"

She knew the answer. She was the only one of them with access to a HUD system, which meant she was the only one with a map. Yet somehow Tweedledee and Tweedledum were pressing ahead in a fight to see who could lead them the wrong way faster.

"Not a clue," Tomas said.

Ben shrugged. "Not really, no. We're looking for another entrance, right? Like a hole or something."

LeFay sighed. "Well, I know you're both large and in charge and all, but you might wanna let me take point on this one. Even in this shambles, I know this city like the back of my hand. I'll find us a way in. Or to be more accurate..."

She held out one of her arms. A compartment opened up, letting out a small, mouse-sized flying drone. It looked at her for a moment and beeped. "This li'l guy will find us a way in. Go on, Pete, go find it."

Ben watched the drone zoom away. "You named your drone Pete?"

Tomas held his hands up. "You had a drone this whole time?"

"Right on both counts, boys," she said. "That little cutie will find us a way in before you know it. We're just gonna wait here for a moment and let

him do his thing.” LeFay sat down on the nearest piece of rubble that looked mildly comfortable. She crossed her legs and started humming.

“We’re wasting time here,” Ben said. “We need to keep moving.”

“We’d be wasting time by moving on until Pete comes back. You know the trick to finding a needle in a haystack?”

“Riddles?” Ben said. “Seriously? We need to get inside that ship and blow it the hell up. But instead, we’re here relying on a robot?”

“Know where it is before you start looking,” Tomas said.

“Bingo,” LeFay said. “One point for the big guy.”

Ben cursed under his breath. “How long is this going to take?”

“I dunno. Two, three minutes maybe,” she said. Then she held out her arm. “Oh wait, here he comes.” Pete the drone beeped and returned home to the compartment in her upper arm.

LeFay looked in her mind’s eye at the images from Pete. He was decidedly low-tech by her standards, but that was valuable here. Low power, no AI, no transmission profile. Pete was tough to follow.

“So where we going?” Ben asked impatiently.

LeFay gave him a punch on the shoulder as she walked past to take point for the group. “We’re taking an entrance I believe you should know well.”

Ten minutes later, the three of them were on their bellies at the underside of the *Atlas*.

“Big enough for ya?” LeFay asked. The deep gash that Ben and the other fighters had blown in the dreadnaught was still visible. Ben found the entire thought of it grotesque.

“That shouldn’t be there,” he said. “Either it breaks the superstructure and the entire ship breaks apart, or it tears open along that seam on impact. Either way, this makes no sense. It’s like the ship didn’t crash at all. It’s like it was simply preserved on the ground as an exact copy of the ship when it was in the air.”

“Shapeless tech?” offered LeFay flippantly. “Who cares? It’s an amoeba-like blob of matter that self-organized into a perfect copy of your father’s ship. Are we really arguing what’s possible for it?”

“Fine,” Ben said. “It’ll work.”

“So what’s the word, boys? Should we go in nice and loud or tiptoe our way in?”

LeFay saw three zealots guarding the back of the ship. Didn't seem like enough men. It looked too good to be true.

"This doesn't feel right," Ben said. He'd also noticed the light protection.

"There should be more people guarding such a vulnerable part of the ship," Tomas said. "But we don't have time to find another way in."

"All right, so we go in quietly," Ben said.

He pulled out a standard-issue utility knife. Tomas did the same.

LeFay stood up. She held her arm out again. This time, Pete came flying out like a little bullet. The drone flew straight through the three zealot guards' heads in one fluid burst before they knew what was hitting them; then it returned to her. She wiped the blood and brain matter off before putting it back away.

"Quiet it is," she said.

"Wait. You could do that this whole time?" Ben asked. "Why the hell didn't you break Pete out earlier?"

"I just re-installed him when Clarissa brought me back home," LeFay said. "Really, I only break the little guy out for the most special of occasions. This seemed like one of them."

"Well, what are we waiting for?" Tomas asked. "The coast is clear. Why don't you bring li'l Pete with us?"

LEFAY LET Ben lead the way into the *Atlas*. She had her HUD, but Ben knew the *Atlas*. Of course, Tomas knew it better, but Ben was bullheaded and Tomas was happy to let him push ahead. There would be plenty of things for him to kill.

As soon as Ben made his way over and through the melted metal, frayed wires, and broken plastic tubing and pipes, he slowed, looking closely at everything around him. "I've been in this ship before," he said. "The real one, at least. And I'll be damned if they didn't get this shit right. Or at least as close as can be, really."

"Pretty eerie," Tomas said.

"Less admiring, more blowing shit up," LeFay said. She took off the belt of explosives around her torso. "Tell me where to place these and then

let's get the hell out of this faithful replica."

"I don't know how detailed this thing is, right down to the power cores," Ben said. "But if we place them on the fold engine and the main engines, then explosions in those two cores will set off a near-instant chain reaction and blow this damn thing to kingdom come."

"Assuming they have similar fuel dynamics in the fold and thrust engines as the real *Atlas*," Tomas said.

"Which is a big if," agreed Ben. "But it would still be the most likely place to set the explosives for maximum damage."

"Well then, what are we waiting for?" Tomas said.

"You were on this ship," said Ben.

"Yeah. Why are you asking?"

"You lead LeFay to those engines. I gotta check on that planet killer. I'll meet you back at the rendezvous point."

"Just for the record, I feel like this is a terrible idea," said LeFay. "The point is to blow it up, so really we don't care if they have it or not."

"If it's here, I want to know we got it."

"And if it's not here, we won't know if that's because they took it or because they never replicated it. So what good is this little side trip?"

Ben took out one of the explosives from LeFay's belt full of bombs. "Just the engines isn't enough. If they do have that weapon, we can't just hope that it's taken out in the blast. With this..." Ben tossed the explosive in the air. "I'll make damn sure we don't have to worry about it anymore."

"That's if they have it and if it's on board," LeFay reiterated.

Ben said nothing. He had an ulterior motive for peeling away; that much was obvious. He just didn't want to discuss it with her.

She had a pretty good idea what it was.

"We'll see ya in a little bit," LeFay said.

Ben looked relieved. He had to know that she was giving him a pass. "Thanks, LeFay," he said.

She turned around. "Don't get killed chasing after daddy," she said over her shoulder as Ben turned a corner. She couldn't quite make out his reaction, but she'd like to think he tried to give her a dirty look.

"I don't like this," Tomas said as he led LeFay through the damaged corridors.

"What's there to like?" she asked.

"We should've stayed together."

“He’s got his reasons,” LeFay said.

“His reasons are stupid.”

“If he makes sure we hit that weapon, I’m happy with whatever else he gets up to.”

Tomas said nothing. He just continued on as quickly as he could, while taking time to check each corner.

“How big is this damn ship?” LeFay snapped after a couple of minutes. “Feels like we’ve been walking for hours.”

“We’re almost there,” Tomas said.

“You said that ten minutes ago.”

“We’ve only been down here five,” Tomas said. “And it should be just past the next couple of bulkheads.”

LeFay pointed down the dark hall. “Right up here?”

“Yeah.”

“Right behind those guys?”

“What guys?” Tomas didn’t see them at first, until LeFay pointed them out. Sitting under the sunlight leaking through a hole in the ceiling were two cultist guards—zealots, judging by their attire and equipment. “Why don’t you use your little drone thingie, Peter.”

“It’s Pete and no, I don’t think so.”

“What? Why not? It’s the quickest, quietest—”

“Who said we needed to be quiet?” LeFay asked. She aimed her rifle at the two cultists and lit them up. They didn’t stand a chance. Their blood splattered against the door to the first engine room. And it was loud—very loud.

“Good going. There’ll be cultists all over this place soon.” Tomas launched himself over the dead bodies and into the engine rooms.

LeFay just shrugged. “Keeping the heat off Ben and on us.”

“You just wanna kill more of these bastards,” Tomas said.

“And you don’t?”

Tomas nodded. “Fair enough.”

“So we both get to kill the bastards that destroyed my home and murdered my fellow citizens by the thousands,” she said. “While we’re going around setting explosives to send them back to their maker.” LeFay stepped into the engine room behind Tomas. “I call that a real win-win situation.”

NINE

ASSIMILATION

BEN KNEW that separating from Tomas and LeFay was a bad idea, but he wasn't looking for safety. He was looking for speed and stealth, and something else. Something LeFay seemed to get even better than he did.

Answers.

If the fake *Atlas* was as faithful a recreation as it looked, then Ben knew where the fold engine and the weapon would be. That was his immediate goal. To get there, he'd have to make it up to the front end of the ship, which meant he needed to pass the area that the Shapeless had turned into their assimilation center.

Ben reached a prep area, meant for engineers to change before and after hazard shifts. Dead Shapeless littered the area, but none of them were burned or showed any signs of trauma at all. From their bodies, half human, half abstract masses of flesh, they must've been trying to pass as the *Atlas*' crew, which was creepy but not unexpected. But they were still, silent.

How did they die? In the crash? Fire?

Against his better judgment, Ben kicked one of the dead Shapeless. It didn't move, so he kicked it harder. Again, nothing.

If nothing else, Ben was learning about the Shapeless with each encounter. First, he'd learned that they were vulnerable. Not only were extreme temperatures and strong electrical shocks a weakness, but it also appeared that they were in some way connected. What other explanation was there for these dead Shapeless? When the ship went down, they went down too, almost like a hive-mind situation. The question remained, though: how the hell were they able to shoot down the *Atlas* to begin with?

Ben heard a screech echo through the halls of the ship. It was followed by the noise of a woman crying. From the sound of it, the sources were close, and they were coming his way.

Putting the grotesque sight of the dead, half-transformed Shapeless out of his mind, Ben pressed up against the doorway to the engineering prep room. He peeked around the corner.

He saw a terrified woman running down the halls of the *Atlas*, straight towards him. She was covered in blood, though he couldn't tell from where. Her feet were bleeding from running on the grated metal floor, which had all manner of debris strewn about on it.

Help her, asshole! She's probably running from whatever the hell they do here.

Ben stared at the woman as she got closer and closer. The logical part of his mind said she was already as good as dead, and all that mattered right now was the mission. Somehow, he forced himself not to move.

A Shapeless creature with the features of a UEF Navy man caught up with the woman. With its mouth opened impossibly wide, it bit down where her neck met her shoulder. The monster tore a large chunk of her flesh out with its teeth, leaving her to fall to the floor, gushing blood. Her eyes were wide, scared, and focused on him.

"Sorry," whispered Ben.

That was a mistake.

The Shapeless snapped its head around. Blood and tendons still hung from the crevices between its razor-sharp teeth. It swung its head back and forth, sniffing at the air.

Ben figured if the monster wanted him, it could come get him. He may not have been able to save that poor woman, but he sure as hell could get some vengeance for her. After taking out one of his two white phosphorous grenades, he knocked on the door frame of the engineers' prep room with his robotic arm. Then he pulled the pin and held it in the same metal appendage.

The Shapeless appeared suddenly in the prep-room doorway, its steps almost silent.

Ben burst out from behind the door and used his metal arm to shove the white phosphorous grenade in the monster's mouth. The Shapeless screamed and smashed his elbow with a big claw appendage, sending Ben spinning around and wheeling away. The Shapeless rushed after him. Just

as it pulled back to swipe at him again with its sharp appendage, the grenade in its mouth went off.

A bright white glow seemed to envelope the creature's entire upper body for a split second. The Shapeless fell back, clawing at its throat, quickly morphing into all manner of shapes in its agony. In a matter of ten seconds, it was on the floor next to the woman it killed, smoke coming off the charred skin of its neck and forehead.

Ben took a second to look at the scratches on his prosthetic arms. It was one of the few times he was happy to have lost his real one.

Next, he moved on to the *Atlas*' cafeteria. He discovered it was something of a holding pen at the beginning of the assimilation process. Predictably, it was horrific.

What's with these things and cafeterias?

People who were funneled in from the outside made their way here first. Once here, the cultists forced them to strip nude before entering. Ben, waiting for the right time to move undetected, watched as frightened and confused Vassar-1 citizens were made to remove their clothes at gunpoint, adding them to a growing pile near the entrance.

Trembling, the now-nude citizens were forced to move on to the cafeteria proper. There, Shapeless in the form of UEF soldiers took measurements of their bodies, took pictures, and made them say random words and sentences. Everything about it was invasive. Private parts were handled, eyelids were pulled back to better observe eyeballs, and every part of their bodies was poked, prodded, and squeezed.

Ben was beyond angry and disgusted. All he wanted to do was grab his rifle and start firing.

The assembly line kept going until the sound of gunshots erupted outside. All the cultists and Shapeless in the ship turned and looked in the direction of the shots. The rate and amount of firing increased.

First to respond to the fighting outside were the cultists guarding the prisoners. Ben waited patiently as they ran towards the large hole in the *Atlas*, where people were being funneled in.

Then he took a chance.

With the bastards distracted by whatever was happening outside, Ben managed to grab one of the cultist guards. He couldn't be more than twenty-something. With a hand over the young man's mouth, Ben pulled him into the hallway outside the *Atlas*' cafeteria. He squeezed the cultist's neck

between his chest and mechanical arm. A squeeze and a pop later, and his abductee was dead. Ben watched as the man slumped to the ground, and realized he'd been wrong before. No way was he in his twenties. More like eighteen, tops.

This is what it comes to now.

Knowing his window was short, Ben quickly took off the rags that the cultist wore. He put them on, and did his best to hide the equipment he'd brought with him. One deep breath later, he entered the cafeteria.

No one seemed to notice Ben. The others were too busy dealing with the threat outside to question his dubious appearance. Even the Shapeless didn't look at him too closely.

Or did they?

Three Shapeless rushed past Ben, screeching. He backed up out of their way, again trying to not be seen or heard. His goal was to get to the closed bulkhead across the cafeteria. From there it was a short walk to the on-board tram transport that would take him to the command deck, and the fold engine that was directly under it.

Ben hated himself for simply walking past all those poor civilians. He couldn't ignore their cries, yet he couldn't acknowledge them either. All the crying and sobbing couldn't penetrate his facade. Some even soiled themselves, but Ben didn't wrinkle his nose.

They're already dead. Remember, you're trying to save those who still have a chance.

Ben paused for a second right before reaching the door out of the cafeteria. He wiped the single tear that had managed to sneak its way out. Then he pulled the lever to manually open the door.

Nothing happened.

"Shit," Ben mumble-whispered to himself. Everything on the fake *Atlas* looked so authentic that he didn't even consider that something like a manual override lever on a bulkhead wouldn't work or even be set up to do so. That left a terrible question. How would he get out the cafeteria to the front of the ship?

There was only one real option. As much as Ben hated it, he had no choice. Through the kitchen, next to the walk-in freezer, there was a door that led to the supply rooms. From there he could get access to the halls and corridors beyond the cafeteria. The problem was that the kitchen was where the Vassar-1 citizens were being corralled into.

Calm as could be, acting like he belonged there, Ben once again entered the cafeteria. He couldn't help but take a peek outside through the large fracture in the side of the ship. All he could see from that far away were the tell-tale red and orange streaks of super-heated bullets flying back and forth.

Ben approached the entrance to the kitchen. It was behind the long counters that soldiers used to line up at to get their chow. The closer he got, the more screams and cries he heard from just beyond the loosely-hinged double doors to the kitchen. The Shapeless, in the form of UEF soldiers, let in small groups, maybe three or four at a time.

When Ben tried to cut the line to get in through the doors, none of the trembling, naked prisoners stopped him. They would've let anyone ahead of them. But the outstretched hand of a Shapeless guard impeded his progress.

"Where are you walking?" the guard asked. Such weird, slightly-off speech was common among those aliens pretending to be human. They hadn't quite gotten it down yet, which was one of the reasons for this assimilation center.

"I'm needed back in the supply room," answered Ben.

The Shapeless guard stared at Ben with penetrating eyes. Ben couldn't tell if it was trying to see if he was lying, or was trying to decide if it wanted to eat him or not. It didn't help that its face kept spasming, trying to figure out what expression it should make for the situation.

"You hurry, fast," ordered the Shapeless guard. "Embrace the Abyss."

Ben nodded. "Embrace the Abyss." With that, he was allowed to pass.

As Ben put his hand on the loose double doors that led back to the kitchen, he noticed blood splatter on the circular windows on each. That, combined with the screams and cries he heard before entering, prepared him for the horror he was about to walk in on.

Or so he thought.

Up until that point, the atrocities and horrors of the Shapeless that Ben had seen were after the fact. He only saw the gruesome results, not the acts themselves. Not until he entered the kitchen.

Ben struggled against his own gag reflex as he watched people being butchered like cattle. Shapeless and cultists alike used large machete-like blades to stab, cut, and sever pieces of the defenseless people. Once they were killed in the most brutal ways possible, their bodies were fed into what looked like a large, undulating black mass of flesh. Some kind of chemical reaction was taking place, rendering the mass as a sludge that seeped into

an opening at the end of a long, flexible tube running out of the kitchen. Ben had no idea what happened after that. He didn't want to know.

Something inside Ben died in those few moments that he made his way across the blood- and gore-covered kitchen floor. It was too much. No one was ever supposed to witness that, and he wasn't alone. Some of the cultists that assisted were overwhelmed, and vomited. He watched as two who refused to participate were cut down and fed to the black mass.

Ben rushed forward as fast as he dared without raising suspicions. He was almost to the supply room when he heard a child's voice behind him.

Just keep moving. Keep moving. Keep your eye on the ball.

But no amount of self-motivation could stop him from turning around.

A family was huddled together, with the son clinging onto his mother's leg. They'd just entered the kill room. The father pleaded with the soulless aliens and cultists for mercy. If not for him, he wailed, for his wife and child. The mother was comforting the son, or trying to. Ben could hear her saying that everything would be okay, even though she was clearly even more fearful than him.

For a second, Ben pictured himself as the terrified boy, with his own mother holding him close in the face of assured death. He couldn't stand the idea of watching them getting slaughtered, especially the child. So he acted, even though it meant straying from the mission.

The first thing Ben did was stealthily pull the pin from his remaining white phosphorous grenades. Then he took his rifle out from under his borrowed rags and shot all the cultists in sight. Stunned, the family of prisoners huddled and ducked down.

There were three Shapeless inside the kill room. They shrieked and quickly transformed their limbs into bladed weapons. Ben, having already armed his grenades, peppered them with regular high-velocity bullets, then tossed said grenades. The grenades exploded, pretty much lighting the monsters up on impact. The black mass that was being fed corpses let out a low, rumbling roar.

"Run! Get the hell out of here!" yelled Ben as he backed up to one wall, trying to avoid the flailing limbs of burning, dying Shapeless. After a moment of panic, the father picked up the son, and he and his wife fled the kitchen out the same double doors that had introduced them to hell.

Ben also had no plans for sticking around. He quickly made for the supply room, then fell in his haste, slipping on the blood on the floor. The

floor was so slick it took him a while on all fours to finally get up and out of the kitchen.

The supply room was completely empty. There wasn't a single box of crackers or bag of flour on the barren shelves. Of course there wasn't. What did the Shapeless need with human food? They'd rather the human beings themselves be the food, it seemed.

Ben ran towards the supply room exit. He was too nervous to look back and see if anything or anyone followed. All that mattered now was the mission, after his moral detour.

When Ben reached the entrance to the on-board tram, he realized a fatal flaw in his plans. The *Atlas* didn't have any power, so how was the tram going to work? How was he going to get the doors open on both sides?

First things first, Ben thought. He used his robotic arm to pry open the door to the tram. He used his prosthetic leg as leverage, pulling as hard as he could on the airtight bulkhead doors. They moved; it was slow, but he saw movement. He felt pain radiate from the old scars where the metallic appendages were grafted into his muscular and skeletal systems as he strained his mechanical parts against his organic ones.

Finally, Ben got the door open. Now all he had to do was climb across the rails to the other side, to the front of the *Atlas*, and pry that door open as well. He couldn't wait for all the fun that would be.

Ben slowly made his rail across the rails. There were two that fed into tracks on the tram pod, which of course was inoperable. The space between the two of them was just narrow enough that he could crawl on and over them.

As he crawled to the front of the *Atlas*, Ben looked out on the clearing. He saw Shapeless gathering together near the assimilation center entrance. What they were doing, he had no idea, but he knew it couldn't be anything good.

Ben tried to ignore what was going on outside, and finally made his way to the other end of the onboard tram rails. Just as he had to gain access, he pried open the door, testing the strength of the servos and other mechanisms inside his false arm. For the first time since the terrorist attacks in Annapolis, Ben was happy to be part machine.

Once inside the front section of the *Atlas*, he got to work. He climbed down the access ladder to the fold engines. He planted the high explosive

he'd taken from LeFay; then he went about trying to see if the Shapeless had the planet-destroying weapon hidden nearby.

UEF Navy engineers had chosen to hide their planet-killing weapon by the fold engine because it would be hard to penetrate the energy halo via standard detection methods. Even a nearspace scan would be overcome by the disruptive energy that the fold engines gave off, even when powered down. No one, not even the on-board engineers, knew about it. Ben didn't technically have clearance himself, but his father had told him about it in broad terms.

Ben reached the false wall that was supposed to lead into the weapon chamber. In order to open it, he'd have to push down on the top right and bottom left corners at the same time. Then the wall should've popped open, revealing the anti-matter warhead that was housed in an equally-hidden torpedo tube, ready to launch.

"Thank God." Ben wiped the sweat off his forehead and breathed a sigh of relief when he popped the false wall and nothing was behind it. But was that really a good thing? He was a little worried at how the Shapeless even knew to include the wall itself. LeFay could be right. They might have recreated the warhead and taken it away, enormous as it was. But that was a worry for another day. He needed to get the hell off the ship before it blew up. No doubt he was running late, and LeFay and Tomas had already planted their bombs.

Ben climbed up the ladder out of the fold engine room, and was startled to see an outstretched hand waiting for him at the top.

He gasped when he saw who it was. Jake Rollins, the officer who'd replaced him on the original *Atlas* mission.

Ben waited for a moment to see what Rollins did. He could climb back down into the fold engine room, but there was only one way in or out, and this was it. When the hand was finally retracted after several seconds, Ben cautiously climbed out, making sure that Rollins wasn't making any aggressive moves in his direction.

"Hello, Ben."

Ben raised his rifle. "Hello, Jake."

Rollins held both of his hands up. He was smiling. "Whoa there. Relax."

"Screw relaxing," Ben said. "Talk fast. I'm in a bit of a hurry."

"As you might have surmised, I'm not the Jake Rollins you knew."

“No shit.”

“I thought it would be more productive talking to you with a face you know and trust.”

“That prick took my job,” Ben said. “So no, I don’t trust him, and I sure as hell don’t trust *you*.” He wanted to pull the trigger so badly, and perhaps he should have, but he was also curious. “Who are you? And make it quick.”

“Because you’re going to blow this place up? Sure. I wouldn’t want you to die here. No, not yet. I have use for you.” Rollins’ face morphed into that of a pale bald man with black eyes.

“I...” Ben knew this new face. He’d seen it before, right before the attack on Annapolis. It was the pale man he’d been obsessed with ever since. “I know you.”

“Indeed you do. If not by name or reputation, you know me in your heart. All living beings do.”

“Who are you? And give me one good reason why I shouldn’t blow your damn head off.”

“I’m the answer to the question of whether there’s life after death. And you shouldn’t kill me because I’m the only one who can give you what you truly want.” The Pale Man’s smile never diminished or faded. It was concrete, as if painted on his face.

“Really? You’re gonna give me what I want? I guess that’d save some bullets if you shoot yourself in the head.” Ben heard a loud roar. It came from outside the ship. The sound was jarring enough to take his attention away from the Pale Man, but only for a moment.

“Don’t worry about that. It’s just some extra entertainment for your friends out there. They’re fighting valiantly—as your kind often does, I’m coming to find out. Some fight harder than others, have more, what do you call it...heart?”

“Look, as much as I’d like to keep up this chat...” Ben backed up towards the exit of the command deck, the bridge, his gun still trained on the Pale Man. “It’s time for me to go.”

“But you, Ben Saito. You have heart,” the Pale Man continued, as if Ben hadn’t spoken. “No matter what we throw at you, you just keep coming. Just like your father. Have you seen him lately? Have you seen his improvements?”

The memory of what his father had become flashed through Ben's mind. When the thing his father had become had tried to kill him after he'd crashed his fighter.

"What did you do to him?" Ben asked.

"We made him better. We made him into what he always had the potential to be. A perfect soldier. A perfect creature. I can offer you the same." The Pale Man took one step towards Ben, then stopped.

"What is it you want?" Ben asked. "Other than to kill as many people as you can?"

"You say that like it's a bad thing. Right now, what I want is your help."

"With what?" Ben asked. "I've seen what your kind is capable of. I doubt you need my help to do anything."

"A woman. A powerful human in your circles," the Pale Man said. "She took something from us here on this useless planet. A rock, to the uneducated eye. Get it for me, bring it to me, and I'll give you what your heart desires."

A rock. All this for a damn rock? "Yeah, I'm gonna have to go with no deal on that."

Ben fired every last incendiary round in his lone magazine. Each one hit the Pale Man. The Shapeless didn't fall, but he wasn't smiling anymore. At least, not for a few seconds.

Burnt parts of the Pale Man's body fell off him like smoldering coagulated oil. His face, still burning ghoulishly, smiled as he slowly moved forward towards Ben, but he didn't give any indication that he was going to attack.

"Come join us, Ben. I'll give you everything you could ever want."

"What could you possibly give me?" Ben asked as he backed up. He needed time to figure something else out. He'd never seen a Shapeless shrug off those rounds.

"Other than your father back?" The Pale Man held out one arm to his side. It turned into a black oil-like substance and fell into a puddle on the floor. Despite that floor being grated, nothing spilled through. Instead, out of the black oil rose the figure of a woman. That figure quickly turned into the spitting image of Ben's mother, Beverly Saito.

Ben lowered his rifle. This time more than one tear spilled out. He cried as she walked up to him. She put her soft, warm hand on his cheek. She even smelled like his mother.

A violent explosion outside made the walls around Ben shudder. He stumbled for his footing, then pushed Beverly away. He turned and ran for the exit.

“That’s okay, Ben,” shouted the Pale Man after him. The first explosion was followed by another and another. “We’ll meet again.”

Ben glanced back one last time. The Pale Man was engulfed in an explosion that he knew was from the high explosive he’d set earlier.

The Pale Man burned at last.

But he still smiled.

TEN

HARD TIMES

“IT ISN’T A COINCIDENCE,” said Detective Kimberly Janis. “I’m telling you.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” replied Sydal. He and Janis sat in Al’s Diner, a staple of the Lunar Market District. He didn’t know why he’d ordered a burger and fries. He wasn’t hungry.

“A couple of poor assholes get killed on their docks, and then they suddenly uproot and get the hell off of this rock?” Janis said. “That sounds like running.” Crumbs from her Reuben dribbled down the table as she talked. She had no issues with her appetite. In Sydal’s experience, she scarfed down every meal like it was her last. How she stayed so tiny was a mystery, and probably one of the reasons most of the other women in the precinct didn’t like her.

“Listen to yourself,” Sydal said. “Waterman-Lau, one of the largest employers in the galaxy, is going to freak out over a couple of routine deaths at one of their myriad docks?”

“It wasn’t a planned relocation. That’s what I hear,” Janis said with a shrug, before taking another enormous bite.

It’d been three months since Sydal got a call to come out to the Waterman-Lau docks on two homicides that remained unsolved. In those three months, the company had shocked the entire system when they’d canceled all contracts and ceased lunar operations.

“Who knows what that even means? Did you actually hear this from someone at Waterman-Lau?”

“Can’t say I ever had the pleasure of speaking to any of them folks personally,” answered Janis, mouth still full of food. “That honor will

remain yours alone.”

“Shifty as hell,” Sydal said flatly. “All they do is talk in circles, give you corporate-speak and answers vetted by their damn lawyers.”

“Well, yeah,” Janis said. “Obviously.”

“Yeah, but...I don’t know. It felt like they were dodging my questions, and they weren’t even pointed questions. I was just fishing. Like they had something to hide even before they knew what they were hiding.” A waitress came over with Sydal’s third cup of coffee. “Thank you, hon.”

“Excuse me, detectives.” The waitress was a middle-aged woman who looked like life hadn’t treated her too well.

“What is it, Irma?” asked Janis. She’d gone to Al’s her whole life. Unlike Sydal, she’d been born and raised on Earth’s moon.

“I don’t...I hate having to ask this and bother you, you know? But I gotta ask. See, I got kids and grandchildren here. Should we be worried? With all that’s going on out there, the company leaving and everything. Things just seem...I don’t remember it ever being this bad.”

Sydal thought Irma was justifiably concerned. In the wake of Waterman-Lau’s sudden departure from Earth’s moon, tens of thousands were without jobs. No jobs, no income, and no support net on the moon. Things were getting ugly fast. The moon had never had much of an independent economy relative to Earth, but now what little there was had completely cratered in the span of a couple of months.

When twenty thousand workers living paycheck-to-paycheck lose their jobs, things tend to go sideways fast. A lot of ex-Waterman-Lau employees had to survive on their savings. More and more people were sleeping on the streets of the Lunar Dome. Most couldn’t afford a flight back to Earth even if they wanted one, not that Earth was exactly excited about the prospect of a bunch of unemployed moonies.

Others volunteered for risky colonization and explorer jobs that would take them to the edges of known space. Crime was rampant, and getting moreso by the day. Gang lords like that ugly bastard Josef “The Hammer” Linderman were growing more powerful than lunar officials.

“It’ll be fine, Irma. Just keep your kids off the street and always take public transit. The more out in the open you are, the less likely you’ll be a victim,” said Sydal. “Do you have a gun?”

Irma’s eyes were as big as saucers. “Yes,” she said hesitantly. “But we leave it in the safe mostly.”

Sydal nodded. “Well, if you’re worried, have it with you. That’s what I’d suggest.”

Irma looked she might pass out as she shuffled away.

Janis rolled her eyes. “Should’ve been a doctor. Never seen better bedside manner.”

“What?” Sydal took a sip of his coffee. “It’s the truth. No reason to sugarcoat it. We don’t leave our apartment without a weapon anymore.”

“Yeah, but...I mean, you could’ve lied to her.” Janis chewed on a wad of fries. “She’s a little old lady.”

“She’s got eyes and ears. Look out that window,” Sydal said. Outside, on the streets next to the diner, were tents, sleeping bags, and cardboard shelters.

“Same shit we’ve been seeing for a little while now.”

“Same shit she’s been seeing, too. Like I said, there’s no point in lying to her.” Sydal took another sip of coffee. “And anyway, you’re the conspiracy theorist, remember?”

“What’s that got to do with anything?”

“You tell me,” Sydal said. He really had no idea; he just didn’t have a witty response.

Janis rolled her eyes.

“What do you have on the agenda today?” Sydal asked to change the subject.

“Me? Dunno. I still got to go over those recordings we took of the Simmons interviews. See if there were any holes in their stories that we missed. Then I gotta go see Harris in Vice. He said he’s got a series of murders on the dark side.”

“Yeah, heard about those. Freaked Maria out. She said it was too close to home.”

“The missus will be fine. She’s a soldier, for God’s sake.” Janis went back to work on the remains of her sandwich.

“I’ll worry about who I want to worry about, thank you very much. And I’m worried about the kids, mostly.”

Janis seemed to mull that over. “Didn’t think about that. I forget about what you family people have to concern yourselves with.”

“We can’t all be happily single.”

“Your loss,” Janis said.

Sydal knew for a fact that half her stories were shit. She just liked to bust his balls.

“When the hell are you gonna move out of the dark side?” Janis asked. “That’s...look, it’s not my place to say, but is that really where you want to raise your kids? In the dark, the seedy-ass, criminal-infested dark?”

“Where would we move?” Sydal asked. “Riddle me that.”

“Good point. You looked into crater living?”

“I can’t afford that shit. Anyways, who would want to live out in the middle of nowhere? When all this does finally go to hell, I wanna be as close as possible to a shipyard, get the hell off this damn rock.” Sydal finished his coffee. It didn’t take him long.

“True. But I heard it’s pretty out there, got a clear view of the ol’ Mother Earth. Plus, none of this shit.” She nodded outside.

Sydal was about to remind her that he’d still work in the middle of all this shit when he saw two men, dressed in fairly raggedy black clothing and ponchos, approach one of the tents just outside.

Janis followed his eyes. “That ol’ nose of yours sniffing something?”

“It’s nothing,” Sydal said. He pressed his index finger against the scanner on the table. With that, he authorized credits being taken out of his account for coffee and a little tip for Irma. Then he slid across the artificial leather seats and stood up. “See ya later. I gotta run.”

“You better. I’m not planning on solving those Vice murders all on my own.”

“Call me when you’re heading down. I’ll meet you there.” Sydal grabbed his hat and coat and made for the exit.

“Trust me, I will!” Sydal heard Janis yell after him as he left.

Immediately upon leaving the diner, he was hit with a wave of lunar dome smells: human body odor, waste, and recycled air. He tried to ignore it, and kept his eyes on the men in black. He could see now that there was a family in the tent. He couldn’t tell if they were harassing them, or if it was just a discussion. Something about it was off.

“Gum? Candy?” Sydal was stopped halfway across the street by a kid selling candy, standing right in front of him.

“No thanks, kid,” Sydal said as he tried to walk around the child merchant. But the kid was persistent, and stepped again into his path. “Can you move?”

“You can’t help them,” replied the kid.

Sydal's focus had been across the street, but now he looked down at the kid. "What'd you just say?"

Sydal heard a woman scream. Instinctively, he knew exactly where it was coming from. He brushed the kid aside as he pulled his sidearm. One of the men in raggedy black had grabbed one of the families' kids, a little girl, and ran. The other punched the father in the face as he tried to get up to protest and try to save his child.

"Hold it right there!" yelled Sydal, pointing his firearm downward as he approached.

The man who'd punched the father turned to Sydal and charged. Sydal hit him in the chest with a stunner before he'd taken two steps. It delivered a big enough electric shock to knock the bastard out cold.

The kidnapper had taken off running with the little girl in his arms. Sydal heard the mother's cries behind him as he took off in pursuit. But catching the bastard was going to be tough, since the Lunar Market District was packed with people.

"HUD! Tag that son of a bitch!" yelled Sydal before he lost sight of the kidnapper. His HUD did as ordered, floating a red glowing tag above the kidnapper's head.

Frustration threatened to overwhelm Sydal as he pushed through the market crowds. On several occasions he had to squeeze between people. One poor guy got run over.

Sydal's shoes weren't ideal for a chase. They were regular business dress shoes, as common for detectives as their suits. Lunar authorities insisted on the formal wear to distinguish them and their rank from normal cops. The shoes were crap, though. The floors and streets of the lunar dome were old, well-worn, and somewhat slick. He fell a couple of times during his chase. But fueled by a large influx of caffeine and the desire to save the kidnapped child, he kept going.

Sydal chased the kidnapper down to the Lunar Market District bus stop. It was an enclosed station because when the transport bus came, unprotected by the dome, air pressure would need to equalize and the breathable atmosphere go undisturbed. With kid in hand, the man in the black poncho slammed on the button to open the bus stop and stepped inside.

As Sydal approached the stop, he couldn't understand what the kidnapper's plan was. Surely he wasn't going to try and escape via

transport? All he would have to do was call in the thruster bus number, and lunar police would take him at the next stop. Or they'd just send a robot interceptor out to grab it, and that would be that.

Sydal waited for the civilians to flee the stop. Then he walked up to the doors, but he didn't go in. The kidnapper held the little girl up with what looked to be some kind of homemade knife to her throat.

Tread lightly. It looks like he's one of those damn cultists. Who knows what the hell he's gonna do?

With a closer look, albeit through smudged, dirty bus stop glass, Sydal at last saw what he was dealing with. He'd heard stories of the Oblivion cultists, of course. Like everyone else on the moon, he watched and read stories about the terrorist cult that was causing all manner of chaos and destruction on Earth. But the cancer hadn't spread to the moon.

At least, not until now.

Sydal pressed the button to open the door to the bus stop. He did so with his free hand up and empty, making sure the kidnapper could see that he didn't have a gun in his hand. "There's no need to do this. Just give me the girl," he said.

"Leave your weapon outside."

Sydal removed his pistol and set it on the ground.

"In," the man said.

"I'll stay out, if it's all the same to you." Sydal wasn't about to lock himself in that bus stop without a weapon.

The cultist stared at Sydal. He didn't smile, didn't frown, didn't seem outwardly emotive at all. That unnerved Sydal a bit. The fact that the running didn't seem to have left him the least bit winded was also troublesome. Sydal was still catching his breath.

"Just give me the girl," Sydal said. "There's nowhere left to run. There's more cops on the way, and the bus ain't coming." It was a bluff, but he didn't expect the cult weirdo to know that. "So you might as well just give me the girl. I'll make sure you're treated fairly. This is the moon, not Earth. There won't be a military tribunal. Trust me."

"Detective Rowan Sydal," the cultist said with no preamble.

Sydal was stunned. He knew he didn't know the man. He cocked his head. "How do you know my name?"

"They said that you'd try to save this poor creature," the cultist said. He pressed the knife a little further into the girl's throat, just barely drawing

blood. “They said you would try and stop me.”

“Stop you from doing what? You haven’t done anything yet. Nothing that you can’t come back from. Just give me the girl and we can talk.”

“You can’t save me, Detective, or this little one. You can’t give me what I want. So you might as well stop negotiating.” The cultist kidnapper’s eyes were wide, bloodshot, almost crazed. “Just accept it.”

Sydal considered picking up his pistol. He could feel in his bones that this wasn’t going to end well. If it wasn’t for the kid, he would’ve simply put a hole in the kidnapper’s head, and that would be that. Unfortunately, that wasn’t an option here. “What do you want?” he asked.

“The cold, loving embrace of the Abyss.”

“The what? You’re not making any sense. I can help you if you just—”

With lightning speed, the kidnapper entered an override code on the door that led out to the lunar surface.

“No!” Sydal fell to his knees and picked up his pistol. He was able to squeeze off one shot before the doors to the moon’s surface opened, but it didn’t hit anything. With the change in atmosphere, the man and the little girl were sucked out into the vacuum. Sydal was almost pulled out as well, but he managed to grab the edges of the door that led to the bus stop. Two seconds later, the emergency doors slammed down, and the atmosphere was reestablished.

Sydal knew what he was going to see when he ran over to the windows of the dome to look out on the surface. That didn’t make it any easier. He looked on hopelessly as the man and little girl slowly floated down to the moon’s surface as dead human popsicles. Other citizens started to gather around the area, alerted by the sirens that had blared as soon as those doors opened.

Sydal holstered his pistol as he walked away from the glass. Now it was time to wait for the boys in blue to show up. He fidgeted. Normally in these circumstances he’d pull out a smoke cartridge, but Maria had made him stop.

He was so shocked and out of it that he almost didn’t notice that he had an incoming call on his HUD. The red exclamation point in his HUD flashed for almost a minute before he answered. According to the notice, the video call was from his wife. He didn’t know if he was in the best headspace to talk to her, but he accepted anyway.

“Hey, babe,” he said, but Maria’s face wasn’t in the video popup. Instead, it was just a view of the living room with the lights off.

“Detective,” a man’s voice answered.

“Who is this?”

“Consequences, Detective. I’m the consequences of your actions.”

For a moment, Sydal thought he recognized the voice. But trying to figure out who he was talking to was secondary. The pressing issue was where his wife was.

“Where’s Maria? Where are the kids?” Sydal walked away from the bus stop, pushing his way through the crowd so he could talk to this mystery man.

“They’re safe. For now,” said the voice.

“How are you calling me on my wife’s HUD?” All Sydal could think was that this perpetrator had somehow hacked it and broken into his home. He hoped that was the case, because the alternatives were too much to bear, let alone imagine.

“Best to show you. Yes?”

Sydal watched as the point of view from his wife’s HUD moved through his family’s living room. He moved towards the window that looked out on the black of the dark side of the moon. When he got close enough, the detective saw a large man holding his wife’s prone body, pointing her head towards the glass.

Renault?

Sydal knew he recognized the man’s voice. It was the supervisor from the Waterman-Lau docks. That raised all manner of questions that were soon buried by pure rage and concern for the woman he loved.

“I swear to God, Renault, if you touch a hair on her head—”

“What? Do you mean like this?” Renault grabbed the unconscious Maria Sydal by the back of her hair and made her nod up and down, left and right.

“Son of a bitch,” Sydal whispered. He needed to get home as fast as possible.

“Relax, Detective. Please, relax. She’s fine. Your kids are fine. I just gave them all a light cocktail to knock them out.” Renault’s voice was emotionless.

“A cocktail of what, you bastard?” People gave Sydal sideways looks as he yelled into his HUD, trying to squeeze his way out of the growing

crowd.

“Don’t worry about it. They aren’t hurt. Not yet. But you’re going to do something for us, though, to keep it that way.”

“For Waterman-Lau?”

Renault laughed.

“What’s so damn funny?”

Sydal watched Renault drop Maria. Luckily there was a rug in the living room; otherwise she might’ve bounced her head off the fake wood floor. He wanted to rip the man’s throat out with his teeth and watch him bleed out while looking directly in his eyes, but there was nothing he could do.

“You, Detective. You’re funny. Like a fly who hasn’t yet realized that he’s already caught in the spider’s web.”

ELEVEN

FATHERS AND SONS

“SORRY ABOUT YOUR FRIENDS,” Tomas said.

Ben watched Ada wince.

That’s what happens you can’t keep people alive. Everyone brings it up.

“Thanks,” she said, her throat obviously dry.

Ben watched as Ada trudged ahead, leading him and the rest of the group back to the safe house where Meryl and the kids were hiding. Her drooping shoulders told Ben everything he needed to know.

She’d lost a lot more than the rest of them in the last few hours. She may have only been with her group for a week, but she’d clearly bonded with them. And she was taking the losses hard.

“What happened back there?” LeFay asked Ben, interrupting his thoughts.

For a moment, Ben considered what transpired back at the *Atlas*. He remembered running as fast as his tired legs could take him. They must’ve been fueled by pure unadulterated adrenaline because even now, they were sore and extremely stiff.

The *Atlas* had blown up behind him. He’d been so close, in fact, that he was picked up off his feet and tossed a good ten or twenty yards by the blast waves. He was so close that he felt the effects inside, in his chest and head. There might’ve been internal bleeding, but none of that mattered. What he remembered most was the Pale Man and what he’d offered.

Ben wasn’t considering taking the Pale Man up on his offer. Not at all. But what he offered was intriguing. Could it be done? Was there a way to stop the Shapeless while getting his parents back? It was a thought he couldn’t shake.

“So where’s this ship you claim we can take to get off this hellhole?” Tomas asked.

“Not far,” answered LeFay. “I’m pretty sure.”

Tomas spun around. “You’re only *pretty* sure?”

LeFay kept walking right past him. “Yeah, pretty sure.”

“Well, I’m pretty sure I’m gonna kill you if we don’t get a ride off this rock.”

“I’m pretty sure we’ll all be walking dead at that point, so what’s the rush?”

“Can you believe this?” Tomas said to the others.

“I’ve been thinking about this,” Clarissa said. “How is it this ship didn’t get taken down by the same electromagnetic pulse attack that took out the citywide HUDs? You sure it works?”

“One hundred percent? Nope. But I’m pretty sure it’ll work.”

“Back to ‘pretty sure’,” Tomas said sarcastically.

“Let’s just say I know a guy. He’s got a ship well off the grid. And I’m *completely* sure he’s still around.”

“I have a couple guesses,” Clarissa said.

“I can’t wait,” LeFay said. “This should be fun.”

Ben left the bickering among LeFay, Clarissa, and Tomas behind. They’d either find LeFay’s ride or they’d figure something else out. He wasn’t ready to worry about it just yet.

Instead, he came up alongside Ada. Like Ben, she had no interest in the quarrel behind them.

“Hey,” said Ben.

“Hey,” Ada replied flatly.

Ben coughed. It was a wet cough. When he looked down at his hand, it had blood splattered on it. That’s when he silently realized that he may have taken more damage than he thought from the *Atlas*’ explosion. But as far as he was concerned, that was his problem to deal with, his problem to keep to himself.

“You okay?” Ada asked.

“Funny, I was about to ask you the same thing. But I feel like both our answers are gonna be ‘no’.”

Ada didn’t reply.

“Losing people sucks. You remember each one. I still see every face when I try to fall asleep. I think it only fades with time.”

“You’re wrong,” said Ada. “I can’t remember any of them. Not one face. Not even those we just lost. Why? Why can’t I remember them?”

“You need to stop being so hard on yourself. They knew how dangerous this was going to be.”

“Is that supposed to make it easier?”

“No,” Ben said. “Not easier, just...my dad, he used to tell me there was a price attached to leadership. And in war, that price is often blood. There’s no way around that. That’s the price you pay for wins. And in war, wins are all that matter.” He shrugged. “He was a heartless bastard, and I think that’s pretty damn clinical. But it still keeps popping into my mind when I think about what I’ve seen.”

Ada was silent for a moment. “What are we winning, though? There’s no victories here. We blew up a ship that was already downed. Big deal. Is that a fatal blow to the Shapeless? Will it make any difference? Or did we simply do the equivalent of kicking the side of a tank as it went by? A goddamn waste.”

“We’re still alive, aren’t we? We’re still going,” Ben said. “That’s the victory. As long as we’re sucking down air, we’re still in this fight.”

“You say that like the fight isn’t already over.” Ada sped up a little bit as the safe house came into view. Then she transitioned into a full jog.

Ben sighed as he watched Ada run ahead to check on the last of her group of survivors.

Real quality comforting there, champ. And quoting the old man’s bullshit? Please.

“Where’d she run off to?” Clarissa asked when she and LeFay caught up with Ben.

“To check on the old woman and the kids,” said Ben.

LeFay pointed to his lip. “Either you’re going for the ‘full red lip’ look, or you got some blood there.”

Ben wiped his mouth again with the back of his sleeve. LeFay glanced at the red streak that was already there. “Rough day?”

“Yeah.”

“She went in alone?” Tomas asked.

“She was pretty upset,” Ben said. “I figured it’d be best if she told them what happened to the others.”

“I’m gonna go check on her,” Tomas said.

“No, I’ll go,” Ben said. “You stay here and keep pumping LeFay for information. You’re so good at it.”

“Screw off,” Tomas said as Ben wandered over toward the safe house. It was a lower level apartment whose only entrances and exits were off an alleyway, and the backyard, which was concealed on all sides by concrete walls. She might not be high on herself as a leader at the moment, Ben thought, but she sure did do a great job of picking a protected, hidden, safe spot for her group.

All the alarm bells were going off in Ben’s head soon as he entered the alleyway. He couldn’t put his finger on exactly what it was, but an almost overwhelming sense of dread overcame him.

Rifle raised, he scanned the wall along the safe house. Something caught his eye. Sticking out from under a cardboard box was a pair of tiny shoes.

He slowly walked forward, dreading what he would find. He used the barrel of his rifle to shove the cardboard aside. The two children Meryl was supposed to be protecting were lying there, face down, their bodies broken and askew.

Ben felt bile rise up the back of his throat, and had to choke it back down. He could only imagine how this would affect Ada.

Ada!

Ben spun around and headed for the safe house door. Before he could approach and enter, it was kicked open. He backed up, rifle held at the ready, as his heart raced.

“Ada?” Ben asked.

He waited for a second. Then another, and a third. Finally, he started forward toward the door, which had slowly creaked back closed again. He began to open the door with the barrel of his rifle when a hand jutted out and grabbed the edge of the door. It was half human-colored, half black as night.

In that moment, he knew what was behind the door.

No, not now. Not here. I’m not ready.

Ben kept backing up until he was in the street. All the while he kept his eyes trained on the safe house door, which slowly opened the whole way to reveal the disgusting thing that was his father, Lee.

Saito’s eyes were as black as obsidian, mouth spilling a black oily substance. His body looked as if there was something underneath his skin,

bulging and struggling to break free. Describing his state as grotesque didn't do the view justice.

Saito held Ada by her shirt, in one hand. Her limp body dragged on the ground.

"Let her go," Ben said.

Saito smiled. It was the same sick smile as the Pale Man, but only for a moment. Then the smile turned into a grimace of anger.

Ben turned to see LeFay, Clarissa, and Tomas come into the alleyway. They quickly spread out, weapons raised.

"No," answered Saito in between very heavy breaths. "I'm definitely not letting her go, son."

"Is she dead?"

Saito smiled. "Not yet."

"What are you?" Ben asked. "And what do you want? I know you're not my father." He didn't feel that way, but he said it. Anything to learn more about what was happening.

"This?" Saito stood up straight. Ben heard popping and cracking noises like bones breaking when he did. "This is potential fulfilled, my son. What I want is for you to come with me. Come with me, with your mother, become the family I lost." Saito raised his arm, palm outstretched. "Or I'll slaughter you and your friends."

Saito raised Ada up with his other arm. Whatever had been done to him, it gave him inhuman strength. "Starting with this one. You care for her, no?" He licked the side of her face with a long, serpentine tongue, covered in the same black oil that his mouth struggled to keep in.

Ben shook with rage at the monster his father had become. "You did die, didn't you? And they replaced you with this...whatever you are. Do you even know?" Ben aimed his rifle directly at his father's head. "And if you're dead, well... I guess I'm too late to save you."

"Dead?" Saito laughed. Ben had never seen his father laugh so hard. "Boy, your father is more alive than he's ever been!" For that last sentence, Ben noticed it was the Pale Man's voice, not his father's, which gave him pause. Maybe, just maybe, his father was still in there, being manipulated by that otherworldly demon.

Ben was distracted. He was so distracted that he didn't notice the two dead children, bodies broken and sliced, rising up off the asphalt of the alley. Their eyes were obsidian, like Saito's. One of them opened their

mouth wider than humanly possible and let out an ear-piercing shriek, much worse than that of a normal Shapeless.

Then they charged.

They ran right through Ben's gunfire, past him, and directly at the rest of the group. Clarissa and Tomas hesitated to fire on them. Neither wanted to accidentally hit Ben. LeFay, however, had no such reservations, and started peppering the area around them. But they were squirrely little things, hard to nail down.

"So your friends can be entertained," Saito said. He threw Ada's unconscious body away like a toy. She landed awkwardly a dozen feet away. "While we talk!"

He rushed Ben.

After all he'd been through, it was probably understandable that Ben's reaction time was a bit slow, but that didn't make what came next any less painful. His father's closed fist connected squarely with his face.

Ben had been in his share of fisticuffs before. He was never one to shy away from the occasional barroom brawl or scuffle, but he'd never been hit this hard in his life. The impact was so powerful that it took him off his feet and dislocated his jaw.

Saito tried to pounce on top of his son, but was stopped by Ben's robotic arm. Its artificial strength was able to flip his father off of him, even though his back was on the ground.

Ben flipped over on his knees in time to see LeFay try to shoot one of the alien zombie children as it zipped by, but it was too nimble. As she reloaded, Ben watched it climb up the walls of a blown-up building like a damn spider, turn and shriek at her, and then jump off, aiming for her head.

"Screw this," LeFay said. She grabbed the tiny Shapeless. It clawed at her arm, removing artificial flesh and exposing the metal mesh over carbon-fiber muscle and metal bone. She let loose a huge electric shock, frying the alien zombie child until it turned black and began to melt in her hand; then she dropped the organic ooze to the ground. "I hate kids," she said.

Ben was back on his feet, but when he looked around, his father was gone.

Where'd he go?

His question was answered when he felt something wrap around his head, cutting off his air and leaving him blind. Panicked, he dropped his rifle and tried to claw it off. Ben was twisted partially around in midair,

enough so he could see that a tendril protruding out of his father's stomach was wrapped around his head, suffocating him.

Just as Ben started to see blackness creeping into the edges of his vision, bullets exploded around him. His father roared in anger as he watched the gunfire concentrate on the stem of the tendril suffocating him.

The tendril ripped away, and Ben fell.

"Move!" screamed Tomas.

With the tendril weakened but still wrapped around his neck, all Ben could do was roll away as fast as he could. A moment later, he saw why Tomas was screaming at him. He'd thrown a phosphorus grenade right at Saito's feet. The only problem was, he didn't account for this version of Saito's many abilities.

Before the grenade landed, another tendril flew out of Saito's stomach and grabbed the erupting phosphorous grenade, tossing it back at Tomas so fast it was a blur. It slammed into Tomas' chest, throwing him backward and setting his clothes on fire.

White phosphorous was dangerous not only because it reached high temperatures, but because it was also impossible to put out. Knowing this, Tomas ripped off his jacket and the shirt underneath. Though he managed to get the clothes off before too much damage was done, Ben saw that he'd still suffered burns to his chest.

Saito charged Tomas, shoulder-tackled him, and sent him flying ragdoll-style into a wall. The impact must have knocked him out, because he slumped down and didn't move.

Saito quickly planted one foot, spun around, and hit Clarissa with another tendril, sweeping her feet out from under her. Seeing downed, vulnerable prey, the remaining alien zombie child jumped on top of her and tried to bite her throat out. Clarissa managed to kick it clear, but it created more than enough of a diversion for the same tendril to smash into her again, this time in the center of her back, and slam her violently against the same wall that Tomas was slumped against. Clarissa, too, was knocked unconscious.

LeFay wasn't spared. As the cyborg tried to reach for a grenade of her own, Saito picked up Tomas's gun and fired the remaining bullets at her. She managed to block her face and chest, her most vulnerable parts, with her arms, but the artificial skin over them got shredded. Before she could recover and put her arms down, he was already right next to her. Ben had

never seen speed like that before. Saito grabbed LeFay by the back of her neck and slammed her face-down onto the street.

Ben finally pried pieces of the alien tendrils off his head. “Stop!” he screamed at his father.

Saito, putting all his new alien heft into crushing LeFay’s windpipe, slowly raised his head to look at his son. The remaining Shapeless child turned from the unconscious Tomas and Clarissa and began to make a slow approach toward Ben.

“Stop!” Ben screamed again.

“The offer is unchanged,” Saito said. “Join me, and I’ll let your friends go.”

Ben stared at the carnage around him. Ada appeared to be regaining her consciousness, but that would just put her in more danger.

“I’ll come with you,” he said.

Saito stared at Ben for a long moment, continuing to squeeze LeFay’s throat and threatening to pop her head like a balloon. Then he smiled.

One of his tendrils shot out and impaled the Shapeless child through its head. Then it flung it up over the buildings, out of sight. Saito let go of LeFay, who fell to the ground gasping for air.

He walked over to Ben. “So, shall we?”

Ben slowly got to his feet. Saito pointed back down the alleyway in the direction they’d come. “After you.”

Ben walked ahead with his father behind him, his tendrils making a strange sound as they slid across the uneven ground.

As he reached Ada, she was still on her knees. She stared up at him. “You can’t do this, Ben.”

Ben gave what he hoped was a reassuring smile. “I’ll be back before you know it.”

Behind him, his father chuckled. Ben ignored him. “I promise.”

TWELVE

CATCHING A RIDE

LEFAY'S NECK hurt from that bastard standing on her, and her arms hurt from that damn Shapeless bitch kid attacking her. But mostly, her soul hurt from the getting asked the same question every five minutes by Tomas.

“And he’s just gonna let you use it?”

Maybe it was just his way of coping with the group’s somber mood. Apparently when nobody wanted to talk, Tomas took that as an invitation to bitch.

“Like I said, Vran owes me. And it’s time to pay the piper.”

“Must be some favors,” Tomas said. His voice was huskier than usual, or maybe it was just the burns on his now bare chest. God knows they must sting.

“I locked his ship down. Set up a new access key. Pretty sure it wasn’t broken,” she said.

“So you’re really not sure that the ship is even still there?” Tomas asked.

“No, I’m sure. Unless it somehow got blown up, which is doubtful. Like most shady characters I know, he kept it hidden. Think of it like a garage, a really big garage for a spaceship.”

“Wouldn’t that be a hangar?”

“Hangar, garage, whatever, flyboy. The point is, the ship will be there.”

“Gotta tell you, you’re not filling me with confidence,” Tomas said.

“I get that a lot,” LeFay said.

Clarissa was helping Ada walk. The Marine was all sorts of banged up inside and out, LeFay knew. She wasn’t really talking to anyone. She could

hardly stand up straight. Arm draped around her shoulder, Clarissa was able to carry her weight despite her own nicks and bruises.

“We have to go back for him,” Ada said.

“We have to get off this rock,” Clarissa said. “Ben is alive. If we’re ever going to save him, we have to stay alive too.”

“Now for the tricky part,” LeFay said. She wasn’t lying when she’d said their ride wasn’t far from the safe house. She knew it because the safe house also happened to be near a city boundary.

City boundaries were just that. Just past the wall in front of them were the expanses of wild Vassar-1. Mostly untamed, it was a truly alien world, with animals, insects, and diseases unlike anything on Earth. Only those who’d lived there their whole lives had any immunities, or knowledge of the dangers in the sun-bleached grasslands.

The barrier that kept the slightly-adjusted atmosphere of the city was just thin plasma. It wasn’t meant to keep anything out; it only kept in the air that human beings were accustomed to. Still, transitioning through it was strange. It was hard to explain.

“This is gonna feel weird, guys. Even for me,” LeFay said after she climbed up on top of the city boundary wall. She helped the others up one by one. “Don’t overthink it. Just, you know, hold your breath and close your eyes, I guess. It’ll make the landing a little harder, but who cares, right?”

“This isn’t gonna, you know, mess us up or anything, is it?” asked Tomas as he slowly reached out for the plasma barrier.

“Just man up and go through.” LeFay picked Ada up easily, and held her in her arms.

“I’m fine,” Ada said.

“You’re weak as shit, and worse off than the rest of us. So just let me help you out.”

“Fine,” Ada said. “I guess this is what cyborgs are for.”

LeFay mock grunted. “Jeez, what do you eat, girl?”

Ada flipped her off.

When Tomas hesitated, LeFay rolled her eyes and jumped through. She instantly felt it grow noticeably harder to breathe. The mix of oxygen and carbon dioxide wasn’t quite the same as it was in the city.

Tomas and Clarissa jumped through behind her.

LeFay was sure that Clarissa felt differently than the rest of them. It was like returning home for the old farm girl. Or maybe it had been so long ago

that she'd forgotten.

The lands outside the city were expansive. At first glance, it was far from hospitable. In fact, the first settlers had felt like they were sentenced to die of thirst and hunger in a wasteland. Below the dusty rolling hills and mountains, though, barely beneath the surface, were fertile farmland and vast reservoirs of fresh water.

"So are we just going to walk? How far away is this place?" Clarissa asked. "We don't have any cover out here. No pilot—Shapeless, cultist, or otherwise—is going to miss us out here if we don't get shelter soon."

"I'm hurt, Claire," LeFay said as she put Ada down. "Truly hurt. You really think I brought you all the way out here to get spotted by some Shapeless jock on a modified moped?"

She stopped at what looked like a little gray rock that looked out of place. After picking it up and throwing it away, she bent down and grabbed the soil.

"Uh, what are you doing?" Tomas asked.

"Digging for gold," she said. "Now shut up for a second."

Finally, her hand touched the corner of the buried tarp.

Bingo.

LeFay pulled up the tarp, and dirt and pebbles rolled off, revealing a metallic hatch. She entered in a code that unlocked it. Then she turned back and smiled at the group.

"Who's down for some spelunking?" Of course no one answered. As always, she was in a better mood than anyone. Enduring years of extremely painful surgery and rehab might've helped her put a perspective on things.

LeFay grabbed the door handle and pulled it open. Under it was a little staircase that led down into darkness. Without any hesitation, she started walking on down. "These tunnels, they got 'em all over the outskirts of the city. Been here for years."

She wasn't sure what possessed her to decide she was now a glorified tour guide. Maybe she really was as crazy as they said she was. And since she'd started most of those rumors herself, that was even more fascinating to consider. Eh, being a borderline schizophrenic had its upsides.

There were hanging lights every twenty feet or so along the path. Water dripped off the tunnel ceiling. On both sides of the slick, narrow path were shallow streams. All of it led downwards.

"Smugglers?" Tomas asked.

“More like drug and weapon dealers. Oh, and the occasional spy or two. But this tunnel, this one in particular? It’s a special brand of tunnel now. It belongs to pirates.”

“Wait,” Clarissa stopped. “Your friend with the ride is a pirate?”

“Did I not mention that before?”

“Shockingly enough, you didn’t,” Clarissa said. Then LeFay saw the light bulb go off for her. “Wait a second. Please don’t tell me you mean who I think you mean.”

“Here we are,” LeFay said as the tunnel ended at a thick steel door. “My good friend Captain Daison Wan’s abode.”

“This is a really bad idea,” Clarissa said.

“Do you have any better ideas? Character flaws aside, he needs us to get off this planet, just like we need him. Not to mention, we have more than a few cuts and bruises to take care of, and his ship has a full medical suite. Hazards of his job, you know.”

“His ship is the *Orion*,” Clarissa said.

“That’s the one,” LeFay said.

“You know this guy and his ship?” Tomas asked Clarissa.

“Everybody does,” Clarissa said. “For all the wrong reasons.”

“People say that about me, too,” LeFay said.

“Fine,” Clarissa said. “We’re here now. But if he ends up shooting us or jettisoning us into space, it’s your fault.”

LeFay laughed. “I can live with that.”

A camera protruded out from above the door on an extended arm. It got right in LeFay’s face. She didn’t look surprised.

“You have a lot of nerve showing up at my door,” said a voice through a hidden speaker somewhere near the entrance.

“Hey, Wan. How’s it going?” LeFay asked. “Holding up well through the apocalypse?”

“What’s to stop me from tasing your ass right now and hacking into your damn brain for everything I need to get my ship flying again?”

“Manners?” LeFay answered.

“Try again.”

“Because it’s not just me out here, Wan,” LeFay said. “I have people that need your help as well.”

“Keep going.”

LeFay sighed. “And I have access to AIC intelligence bank accounts.”

“Which will be worthless after the universe learns that the capital is in flames.”

“There’s plenty of places it’ll still spend,” LeFay said. “And you know all of them.”

Wan was silent for several seconds. “LeFay?”

“Yeah, Wan?”

“I hate you.”

“Love you, too.”

The door swung open.

EPILOGUE

BEN WALKED beside the thing that had once been his father.

Neither of them spoke.

The thing's face, beyond the obsidian-black eyes and some residue of the black oily substance that stained the inside of his mouth, looked like his father. The body, save for the strange tentacles it seemed to have sprouted, looked like his father too.

Ben's logical mind told him that this was a Shapeless creature doing an uncanny impersonation of his father. He'd seen them do that before. It was, after all, their defining feature.

But all the Shapeless he'd seen before this had been people he didn't know well. Simply acting human was enough to fool him, or anyone else not paying close attention.

But this was his father, the man he'd known all his life, and all the mannerisms and quirks were there. The subtle way he moved. The twitch of his eye. The way one arm swung more than the other.

His heart refused to process the possibility that buried somewhere inside this thing wasn't his real father after all.

"You made the right decision," the thing calling itself Lee said.

"You say that like you gave me a choice," Ben said. "Either I came with you, or you murdered my friends."

"Still."

"What happened to you?" Ben asked, watching for any reaction on his father's face.

But Lee remained unmoved. "That's not important. What *is* important is what you're going to become."

“What if I don’t want to become anything? What then? Are you going to force me to become something?”

“I won’t need to force you to do anything.”

“Really? Because you forced me to come with you just now.”

“I gave you a choice.”

“Yeah, come with you or you murder my friends,” Ben said.

“They didn’t matter.”

“And I do?”

Lee stopped. Ben kept going a few steps until he noticed. He paused and looked back.

“Of course,” Lee said. “You’re all that matters right now.”

“Why? Because I’m your son?” Ben again searched Lee’s face, desperately searching for one little spark that indicated there was still a man in there to save.

Lee started to move again. “Come. I have so much to show you.”

He led Ben through the city. It was odd to move so freely. Ben walked by cultists who not only let him pass, but seemed to actively avoid him. He passed by Shapeless who, instead of chasing him and trying to slice him into little pieces, didn’t pay him any mind.

When they reached what was left of the *Atlas*, Ben saw only the molten remains gurgling in some ongoing chemical reaction, like a massive lava rock. The shape of the ship was nearly unrecognizable. Floating in front of it was a dropship-sized black sphere. It undulated and moved like the massive sphere Ben had seen outside of the sanctuary station.

One side of it opened as they approached.

“What is this?” Ben asked, coming to a stop.

“Our ride,” Lee said. “No reason to worry.”

Ben looked coldly at Lee. “No need to worry? Is that a joke? Can genocidal murdering piece of shit aliens make jokes?”

The tendrils from Saito’s torso reached out for the black sphere. They penetrated it, then were absorbed. By those tendrils, Saito was lifted off the ground and pulled into the ball. He reached back to Ben. “Genocide. Murder. There’s no such thing. That’s just one of many things I have to show you. Just take my hand.”

Ben stared at Lee’s outstretched hand. There was something profoundly appropriate and sad about seeing this compromised, corrupt version of his father in front of the burning effigy of the ship that he’d once commanded.

“What else are you going to do, son? What can you do? Are you just going to wander these wastes? Look for other survivors?” Lee smiled. “I’ll kill whoever I have to, as many as I have to, to bring you home. To reunite our family.”

“Mom’s dead. There is no family.”

Saito’s outstretched hand didn’t waver. “Death, like genocide, isn’t the evil you think it is. Come with me and I’ll show you.”

Ben thought of the others. Of Ada and Clarissa. Of Tomas. Even LeFay. He told himself that if he could buy them time, this was worth it. And if he got some answers at the same time, so be it.

One thing he wasn’t going to do was bend to the wishes of this creature in front of him. But he could play along for now.

Ben took Lee’s hand. Together, they disappeared into the black sphere.

BOOK 6: ORION INBOUND

ONE

A PIRATE'S LIFE

CAPTAIN DAISON WAN was only supposed to be on the AIC capital planet for a week. He'd do a little business, unload some cargo—legally procured and otherwise—and let the crew get a little rest and relaxation. He'd be off the rock before anyone was the wiser.

Things hadn't turned out the way Wan had planned, but then again, when did they?

It had all gone to shit when his old friend LeFay had shown up for a night of poker while half his crew was in the city. She'd set up plenty of business for him over the years without giving him an ounce of respect, which was probably Wan's relationship with half the people he considered friends.

She'd managed to get Wan drunker than usual, and then proceeded to taunt and insult him while taking all his money, before somehow goading him into putting his ship on the line. Since he always cheated at cards, he felt good about it—until he found out she cheated better than him.

Once she'd gathered all the money and most of Wan's pride, she'd asked to take a tour of "her new ship." Wan knew it was just to humiliate him, and he was waiting with a blaster to escort her out of the hangar when she got done gloating. There was no way she was getting his ship. She had to know that.

But the joke was on Wan when LeFay managed to kill the power to the hangar from within the ship, and then slipped out while Wan and the rest of his boys were trying to figure out what had happened.

He assumed *that* humiliation was the end of it, until one of the shit-for-brains he paid to maintain the ship told him the next day that LeFay had

managed to somehow lock them out of the flight controls.

That had been on the second day on the planet. Wan knew that with enough money and enough bribes, he could find someone to fix what she'd done, but it was going to throw off his schedule and his profits. In the end, he was sure she'd be back in a week or two, demanding a piece of his action in return for letting him use *her* ship. Whatever. He could wait her out.

Two days later, he found out he was wrong. When the UEF attacked Vassar-1 with their huge dreadnoughts, Wan and the rest of his crew were trapped.

Wan was smart enough to not be courageous. He ordered his men to stay underground in their little base. Soon enough, whatever was happening would blow over. It always did. That's how the universe worked. Once the coast was clear, he'd get a hacker to fix what LeFay had done, and they'd leave. Or, depending on the situation on-planet, look for a way to profit first, and then leave. His whole career had been built on these little disturbances in the universe.

This little disturbance, however, had grown out of hand. Wan had listened on his back-channel network as the word had gone out to the rest of the Outer Colonies about the battle over Vassar-1. He'd been as shocked as anyone when he'd learned the fight had led to the complete annihilation of the AIC capital.

The Outer Colonies were amassing their forces, dead set on getting revenge against Earth. There must be some command structure out there, because the official channels were full of surprisingly accurate chatter. A counterattack was coming. Wan could feel it in his pirate bones. While there might be profit in that, too, he'd had enough of this little high-stakes drama. He was ready to get off-planet and on his way.

So when LeFay had shown up at the blast doors, he'd wanted to kiss her.

But kissing the woman that had left his crew's life in danger—who was he kidding, *his* life in danger—wasn't good for his reputation. So he was an asshole instead.

"Give me the goddamn code, LeFay," he said as he walked alongside the cyborg cardsharp and the three roughed-up strangers he'd just let into the base.

LeFay rolled her eyes, but otherwise didn't slow down. "Not until we're on board," she replied.

“We didn’t agree to that.”

“Code for passage off this hellscape. That’s the deal. And throw in some medical attention for my friends.”

Wan glanced back at her ‘friends’ without acknowledging them. “You’re lucky I’m not feeling well today, or I’d personally pry those codes out from the wires and chips that make up your brain.”

Wan was moving a little slower than usual. Years ago he’d been struck with Eruvian Lung while spending some quality time on the flying prison above Erol. Just a slight misunderstanding involving freight ownership. He’d lost his profit, and only come away with a creeping sickness to show for it. It was non-life threatening, but debilitating when the stars aligned against him.

“You’re half my size soaking wet,” LeFay said dismissively.

Wan was used to this. He was regularly underestimated for his size and stamina. But LeFay didn’t seem like the type to underestimate anyone, at least not unless it was to her advantage, which meant she was probably just stating the truth as she saw it. He really did like the cynical bitch.

“Where is everyone?” LeFay asked without skipping a beat. “After the humiliation, did they up and leave you?”

‘Everyone,’ Wan knew, was the three members of his crew that had been at the poker table last week.

“Hardin died in a shootout with those creepy cultist bastards,” Wan said.

LeFay shrugged. “Happens these days. And Talos? I liked her.”

Of course you did, Wan thought. *She laughed at your jokes.* “Talos went out on a food run just before the fighting started up there, and we haven’t seen her since.”

“And Kelso?” LeFay asked. “Let me guess. He’s probably just fine.”

“He’s working on the ship.” Wan hooked a thumb at the ship in question, the *Orion*.

The *Orion* was a customized corsair. She’d started out life as a cruiser, but Wan had converted and armed her to fight space battles, board other ships and, most importantly, outrun any authorities. In short, she was a formidable ship.

Kelso, a big strong man who looked as dumb as a bag of rocks, worked on the exterior, pounding away with a mallet.

“Called it,” LeFay said triumphantly. “Always bet on the dumb ones.”

“Wait,” said a skinny woman with crafty eyes who was following along behind LeFay. “*Working* on the ship? Is it not ready to go?”

“Who the hell are you?” Wan asked dismissively.

“Be nice,” LeFay said. “Remember who the boss is around here, short stuff.”

“The boss?”

“My ship,” she said. “Remember?”

Wan seethed.

“So is it ready or not?” asked the skinny woman. She crossed her arms like she was owed something from Wan, when he’d barely laid eyes on her before. Still, he’d seen enough trouble in his life to know it when he saw it.

“She’s ready,” he sneered. “We’re just working on it to work on it. We’re always working on it. Right now the lughead’s hammering out some dents. What else are these mouth breathers gonna do when we’re cooped up down here?”

“If it’s ready, then what are we waiting for?” asked LeFay.

“Other than for you to unlock the flight controls? Nothing at all.”

“Good,” LeFay said.

Wan scratched his scraggly, braided beard. LeFay was a hard one to read. He knew she was modified to hell and back, but he had a feeling she hadn’t been all warm and fuzzy to begin with. Still, he needed his damn flight controls, and frankly, he could use someone like LeFay. The most powerful enemies made the best friends, his father used to say, or maybe he’d read that somewhere. Hell, who could say?

“Let’s get aboard, then,” Wan said. “So we can leave this hellhole planet.”

“I like the sound of that,” said the woman behind LeFay. She was getting on Wan’s nerves.

“Hurry up,” LeFay said. It wasn’t clear if it was to him or the rest of her group.

Wan replied by mumbling some expletives under his breath.

“What’s that?”

“I said follow me, you damn devil woman,” Wan said as he led them up the extended loading ramp into the *Orion*. He waved at Kelso. “Kelso. This is LeFay and ... others,” he said, barely acknowledging the rest of the group.

“You know me, Kelso,” LeFay said. “I still have a good chunk of your money.”

The big man grunted.

“These are my friends Clarissa, Ada, and Tomas,” LeFay said.

Wan noted the loudmouth was named Clarissa. The one called Ada was pale, and looked to be in rough shape. Tomas just looked generally angry, which he could sympathize with.

Kelso smiled with a mouth filled with maybe six or seven teeth, and waved with inexplicable enthusiasm at the cyborg woman and her motley group. There was no understanding Kelso sometimes.

“Is he...right in the head?” asked LeFay. “I remember him being quiet, but not stupid.”

“Then you remember wrong,” Wan said flatly. “He’s not one for words, or ideas, or concepts.”

“But he’s your engineer?” Tomas said incredulously.

Wan shrugged. “He’s a hell of an engineer. Really a damn savant. Ain’t that right, Kelso?”

“I bang until it’s right!”

Wan led the group further into the *Orion*, thoroughly enjoying the stunned silence of those following.

TOMAS TRIED to keep focused as Wan gave his tour of the ship, but the pure insanity of what was happening was beginning to sink in.

Wan brought them to the med bay, and Tomas couldn’t help but think that the reason was the shape of his new guests. Tomas was still nursing his wounds—as was Ada, who stoically refused to slow down for anything—but he could sense how stiff she was as they walked. She had to be hurting.

The medical space was surprisingly well-equipped and clean, better than Tomas had hoped for. The whole ship looked a lot better inside than out. For all his character flaws and illegal activities, Wan seemed to be a stickler for cleanliness and order, which Tomas could immediately appreciate.

“Our nurse, doctor, surgeon, all-around special gal, Doc Congo,” Wan said, indicating a person with their back turned to the group, inspecting a

restoration pod. “And also the only person aboard with medical skills.”

The woman spun around in her stool. She was a surprisingly tall woman with a slender, attractive face. Her short-cropped green hair didn't cover her ears, which sported rings that virtually covered them in metal. What really stood out, though, was the crucifix on a chain around her neck. Christianity was an antiquated, rarely-encountered religion on Vassar-1, or any planet.

Tomas nodded, as did Clarissa. LeFay didn't seem to bother looking up, and Ada was too weak to do much more than stare.

“Oh, lord, what have you brought me this time, Wan?” the woman said in a thick accent. She had an odd look on her face, a mixture of concern and annoyance.

“A couple of new friends, temporary crew members. They're all banged up, need some patching. Think you can take care of them?”

The doctor was already ignoring Wan and eyeing up Tomas and Ada. Her gaze lingered on the latter with growing concern. “Damn. What else am I gonna do?”

“Make it quick,” Wan said, before he started leading Clarissa and LeFay out of the med bay.

“What's the rush?” Congo asked.

“We're getting off this damn planet,” Wan said.

“Finally,” mumbled Congo. Then she addressed Tomas and Ada. “You two, take a seat over there so I can take a look at you.”

Tomas helped the half-conscious Ada over to one of three med bay beds. He gently helped her sit down and, with one hand on the small of her back, kept her upright.

She didn't acknowledge his help, but didn't pull away either. Tomas considered that the most worrisome part of it all. The self-sufficient Ada he knew surely would have, if she could.

All the while, his own chest burned. His third-degree burns being exposed to open air and, as a result, infection, didn't help.

“Those are some bad burns, my friend. What's your name?” asked Congo.

“Tomas Ruis, but don't worry about me. She needs help more than I do.”

“You sure about that? Those are bad. Phosphorous?” asked Congo as she moved her rolling stool to get a closer look at Tomas' chest.

“Stupidity, really. Is your name really 'Congo'?”

“Don’t be stupid. Of course not, but no one on this ship seems capable or willing to try and pronounce my real name. So instead they use ‘Congo,’ because that’s what Wan came up with, for some damn reason.” Congo got up. She looked to one of the many shelves behind glass doors in the med bay. From one she took out a stim shot and some memory bandages.

“So what’s your real name?” Tomas wanted to make awkward small talk to distract him from what he knew was coming.

Congo stabbed Tomas, without warning, in his stomach with the stim shot. It instantly flooded his veins and tissue with a numbing morphine-like pain killer. There was also another aspect of the stim shot: artificial adrenaline that would keep him awake. Those injection pens were meant for soldiers, not hospital patients, but the end result was close enough and did the job.

“Not important. Now, this is gonna hurt. I have to clean the wounds.” Congo had the bandages in one hand and a UV purifier in the other. The intense light would literally burn out and kill any bacteria that managed to cling onto Tomas’ wounds.

It wasn’t that soldiers were inherently tougher than civilians. Not at all. Nor were they more impervious to pain; nor did they feel it any less. Even with the numbing effect of the stim shot, Tomas felt every little bit of agony as the UV purifier was run back and forth inches from the burns on his chest. All he wanted to do was yell out in pain: curse the gods, the Shapeless, Saito, the cultists, and Doc Congo herself. Instead he shook a little, sweated a lot, and stayed silent.

Once the UV purification was done, Congo wrapped the form-fitting memory bandages around his chest and back. They vacuum sealed to his body for an uncomfortably tight but beneficial fit. All that was left was for him to wait for his body to heal. Topical medications on the bandages would help speed the progress along.

“Okay, now, let’s see what’s going on here with your friend,” said Congo as she pulled down a medical scanner that was on an arm attached to one wall. She switched it on, showing an x-ray view through the viewfinder.

“Ada. Her name is Ada,” Tomas informed her.

“Okay, let’s see what’s going with Ada here.” Congo moved the medical scanner all around Ada’s body. From the furrowing of her brow and surprised looks, Tomas could tell that something was up. She was seeing something bad on the viewfinder.

“What is it? What’s wrong?”

Congo shot up. “Help me get her up and undressed. Hurry!” The doc’s demeanor completely changed. She went from a little annoyed and businesslike to worried. That, of course, sent Tomas’ head into a tailspin.

“What is it?”

“Your friend has some severe internal injuries. Since we can’t operate, because I have no idea how to fix that much damage, we need to get her in the tank, or she’ll bleed out from the inside. Heck, she still might, but this is her only shot.”

“OKAY, SO THIS IS THE BRIDGE,” Wan said sarcastically.

Clarissa rolled her eyes. There was clearly some animosity between Wan and LeFay that was playing out here, but she could also tell that Wan was an asshole—which pretty much summed up her opinion of most pirates, particularly bottom-feeders like Wan.

Orion’s bridge was impressive. It was about three times the size of the one on the *Lost*, and Clarissa had to admit she found it a bit intimidating. Though it was more modern, it was also a little more messy. They had clearly made some massive customizations to the pilot’s station.

“What is going on here?” she asked no one in particular.

“Perfection. That’s what’s going on here,” answered someone from the main pilot’s chair.

“And here’s our oh-so-pleasant pilot, Johannes “Falcon” Dotterson. We just call him ‘Falcon’ for short.”

Wan presented a highly unusual pilot.

Clarissa glanced at LeFay. She was herself was a custom job, so Clarissa expected that she would appreciate Falcon. LeFay had done, and had so much work done, on her body that she was hardly recognizable as a human as soon as you penetrated her skin. But at least she looked like a person. Falcon Dotterson did not. Not really.

Falcon was literally attached to his pilot’s chair. Wires, tubing, and a variety of clamps made him one with not only his seat and the bridge, but with *Orion* itself. His arms ended in custom-made piloting sticks, not hands. His eyes had been replaced with a wide visor, connected to cameras

on the ship's exterior and interior along with all the ship's systems, constantly monitoring every little aspect of the vessel. Only his mouth, teeth, and tongue inside looked to be intact and unchanged.

"He's the best pilot in the damn universe." Wan rested one arm against the back of Falcon's chair.

"What's with the names? 'Doc Congo', 'Falcon', even 'Ace'!" Once she realized what she'd said, LeFay made a face like she'd just stepped in it. "Sorry, Claire."

"It's fine," answered Clarissa, but it wasn't.

"I dunno. We're shady characters. Why not have colorful names?" Wan shrugged his shoulders. "Plus, this guy flies like a damn Mericore Falcon. Anyway, it's better than 'Johannes'."

"You know what's up there, Falcon?" asked Clarissa, indicating the skies above Vassar-1.

"Of course I do. You think we've just been hanging out down here drinking beer, playing cards, maybe watching the feeds?"

It seemed Wan's brand of sarcasm ran in the crew. How wonderful.

"And you're ready to fly through it and off-planet?" Clarissa wasn't trying to be a dick, or competitive. She was legitimately concerned. As augmented as *Orion's* pilot was, the skies above were filled with cultists and Shapeless, and she doubted he had any experience fighting either.

"Captain, who the hell are these people?" asked Falcon, instead of answering Clarissa.

"That's....Claire?" Wan said.

"Clarissa," she corrected.

"That's what I said, Clarissa." Wan introduced his two guests. "And this sexy robot is LeFay."

"I don't care about their names. What are they doing here?" Falcon asked. "And correct me if I'm wrong, but we can't take off and go anywhere until I can regain access to launch controls."

Wan wiped a smudge off the bridge window. "They have the code to access the launch controls, and we're giving them a ride in return."

"Wait." Falcon stared at LeFay. "Is this the one that that—"

"Yes," Wan said, cutting him off.

Falcon smiled. "Lovely."

"Can you just get down to business?"

Falcon nodded at LeFay, seemingly with newfound respect. “Absolutely. Whenever you’re ready.”

“Start your pre-flight preps,” LeFay said. “We’ll leave as soon as possible.”

TWO

PROTECTOR

THE LUNAR SURFACE rushed past Detective Rowan Sydal as he drove a stolen ground rover as fast as he could back towards the dark side of the moon. A Waterman-Lau dock supervisor, Renault, had his wife. And he wasn't about to let her die, like the poor little girl he couldn't save from a cultist's grasp.

Though Sydal tried his best to ignore the image of the homeless girl he'd failed to save, skin sparkling from moisture freezing on it, his imagination wouldn't cooperate. All he could picture was Maria and their daughters, slowly falling to the moon's surface in a jumble of arms and legs. All frozen. All dead.

He blinked the image away.

The rover bounced up and down as the gyroscopic systems, meant to steady the ride, couldn't compensate for Sydal's complete lack of care about what he drove over. He drove over holes and rocks, and almost fell into a crater, but still, he didn't slow down.

If he wasn't so panicked and in a hurry, Sydal might've taken a moment to take in the beauty of the scenery around him. Still in the section of the moon lit by the sun, he could see the very clear terminator where the sun's light was cut off and replaced with deep dark. Only the lights from the buildings that stood there, which looked like stars, gave any hint that there was anything there past the rays, other than the uncomfortable nothingness of space.

Come on, you piece of junk. Go faster!

Sydal looked down at the speedometer of his newly-acquired lunar rover. It had weighted heavy-grav units that made it stick to the ground,

unlike the comical rovers of years past, but he still couldn't push it past about forty miles per hour. Every second counted, and who knew what he would do if he didn't get home in time to save his wife?

Part of Sydal hoped that his wife's military training would kick in. He couldn't imagine her overpowering Renault, since the Waterman-Lau dock supervisor was too big and strong. But in his mind's eye, she would use technique to take him down. Then he imagined that when he, Sydal, entered the door to their apartment, his wife would be there, proudly standing with her boot on the downed asshole. Reality, though, rarely worked out so great.

Finally, Sydal reached the closest entrance point to the group of buildings where his family's apartment was. It was a service entrance, which would have to do. He'd have to embark on a pretty lengthy run, but at this point he didn't care. As long as he could rely on his own legs instead of a piece of machinery, he'd feel better.

No! You son of a...you're gonna move!

Much to Sydal's chagrin, there was another rover docked at the service entrance. Judging by its big trailer, he figured it was some kind of delivery vehicle.

Sydal tried to fire off a near-space message, but the delivery rover wasn't receiving. The bastard. He had to take more drastic measures. Sydal knew he'd take shit from the chief, but nothing was gonna stop him from docking there and getting inside.

"Sorry, buddy," Sydal said as he gunned it straight towards the vehicle. As he got closer, he buckled his seat belt, tightened his grip on the wheel, and waited for the impact.

Gravity does funny, unexpected things. Seconds before hitting the delivery rover, his heavy-grav units cut off, and Sydal braced himself for a violent crash. The reality turned out to be very different.

Both Sydal and the docked delivery rover pretty much bounced off of each other, only giving the detective a moderate jolt. He managed to move the other rover's wheels, but it was still clamped down and docked. So instead of going at it full speed to knock it off, he decided to simply push it off.

Sydal pressed his rover into the other one. His heavy-grav units repeatedly shut off automatically, but he overrode them each time as he slammed down hard on the accelerator. As with all rovers, the airtight docking door was on the delivery vehicle's roof, so what he had to do was

apply enough acceleration to break its docking clamps so that he could replace it.

And that was exactly what happened.

Completely ignoring the damage he did, Sydal quickly took the place of the delivery rover. Then he went about docking. The second the air pressure equalized, he opened the door and climbed the ladder up into the dark side facilities.

“What the hell, man!” screamed the angry delivery driver. “You wrecked my rover! You gonna pay for that, cause I’m not getting that taken out of m—”

He’d feel bad about it later, but in the moment, Sydal had no time for any bullshit. He punched the delivery driver out cold, flashing his badge to any onlookers, and started running. Knowing what he knew about the interconnected buildings on the dark side of the moon, it’d take him about fifteen minutes to run to his apartment. That meant he needed to double-time it and shoot for ten.

There were shops, stands, stalls, restaurants, and stores, same as in the dark side’s lunar dome, only everything was much more rundown and depressing. The homeless here were truly desperate, without even proper clothing or blankets to sleep under.

Sydal let nothing get in his way. He trucked along, refusing to slow down. Anyone who got in his way either got shoved, run over, or shoulder-checked. Like a runaway train, he absolutely wrecked anything in his path.

He didn’t slow down until he reached the entrance to his apartment building, and that wasn’t by choice. He had to slow down in order to enter his code at the front doors. Since he was so worked up, his fingers slipped, and he accidentally entered in the wrong numbers a couple of times—to his extreme aggravation—until he finally got it right.

Sydal reached his apartment door and was about to open it when he took a second to catch his breath. It’d been a very long time since he’d gotten any exercise, let alone that much running. He had to swallow down the vomit in his throat, and took out his pistol. Once he stopped shaking, he opened his apartment door.

He slipped in, expecting to be faced with Renault, but the entryway was empty. He tiptoed further inside.

He quickly scanned his apartment, and was somewhat surprised to find it clean and orderly. Nothing was out of place. There was no sign that there

had been a fight or struggle. Perhaps Renault had sneaked up on Maria and caught her by surprise. That would make sense. She was too formidable of a woman to let herself be captured without defending herself.

But the house was completely silent. Finally, he couldn't take the silence any longer.

"Maria?" he hissed down the hallway.

"What?" Sydal heard his wife's calm voice from the bedroom. She emerged from the bedroom doorway, in her pajamas, looking as relaxed as could be.

Sydal was confused. *Where's Renault? Why is she so calm? What's happening?*

"What's up, babe?" Maria said. "Why are you sweating? And why are you holding your gun? Is everything okay?"

"Where is he?" Sydal breathed, still not sure where Renault might be in the apartment. He began to slowly inspect the hallway.

"Where's who?"

"Renault!" Sydal thundered. "I saw him! He called me from your HUD and....where'd he go? Is everything okay?"

"I dunno. *Is everything okay? And who the heck is Renault? Baby, you're scaring me.*" Maria walked over and tried to hug Sydal. He was sure that she could feel the trembling of his arms, and the damp sweat that soaked through his clothes.

"I'm...yeah, everything is okay," he said, his pulse slowing. After a few seconds of being hugged, Sydal pulled away. Then it hit him. "The kids! Are they...?"

"They're asleep, of course." Maria pressed her head against his chest.

Sydal felt like he was in a dream. Maybe he was. Maybe he was going insane. "I'm sorry, I don't know what got into me. I got a call. I thought you were in danger. This guy Renault, some shady guy who works for the company—"

"Waterman-Lau? Some guy did stop by a little bit ago." Maria separated from her husband. She walked over to the kitchen counter on sock-covered feet. On it was a small hyperdrive. After picking it up, she brought it over to the detective.

"What's this?" Sydal was still trying to make sense of things in his head. He'd been having trouble with his memory lately, but a complete

lapse in reality, hallucinations? Silently he told himself that he had to make an appointment the next day to see somebody.

“A guy from the company, big dude, came over. He did look kind of, I dunno, intimidating, so I didn’t let him in, but he asked me to give this to you. He said it’s a list of people who had access to the docks that day, for your case. And he also said it had security footage.” Maria handed over the hyperdrive.

“Hmmm, thanks. I’m gonna, I gotta go take a shower.” Sydal was embarrassed and concerned. Was he seeing and hearing things? That begged the question: had what happened back in the lunar dome *really* happened, or had that been a hallucination as well?

“Okay. You must be hungry. I made some baked chicken, I’ll warm you up a plate so it’s ready when you get out.”

Maria was about to return to the kitchen when Sydal grabbed her by the arm. He kissed her. “Thanks, honey. You’re the best.”

THREE

LIFTOFF

“STARTING LAUNCH SEQUENCES,” said Falcon. He spun from side to side as his hands hovered over the screens, and Clarissa had a good look at how he protruded out of the pilot’s chair, if that was even the right term for it. Was it a chair or just ... him?

“All right. Guess it’s time to address the crew.” Wan sat down and strapped himself into his captain’s chair. Joining him on *Orion*’s command bridge was Tonga Anoa’i, a burly weapons specialist responsible for onboard cannons and missiles. There was the navigator, Tomohiro Naito. Clarissa was in a fold-out chair attached to the wall next to LeFay.

“Here he goes,” grunted Tonga. With his face heavily tattooed, the Samoan weapons specialist even looked scary when he smiled.

“Attention, my beautiful crew aboard my beautiful *Orion*. This is your captain, supreme leader, emperor, and god, Daison Wan. I’m happy to inform you that the time has come to get off this damn rock once and for all. I hope you finished all your double-crosses, broke all your hearts, and said all your goodbyes, because we ain’t ever coming back. We lift off in two.”

“Opening up the cave.” Falcon flipped a switch. Then the whole hidden pirate bunker began to shake as huge sliding doors above the *Orion* slowly slid open. From the command bridge, everyone could hear rocks, dirt, and other debris atop of the hidden doors raining down on top of the corsair.

Wan leaned back in his chair and opened a bag of chewy candy that Clarissa hadn’t seen since she was a child. “Where’d you find that?” she asked.

Wan shrugged. “Dead kid, I think.”

Clarissa was repulsed. Then she heard LeFay chuckling. “That’s funny?” Clarissa asked.

“He bought them. He doesn’t have the guts to kill a fly.”

Wan threw another bite into his mouth. “Didn’t say I killed him. Said he was dead.”

“He brought them here with him,” the navigator Naito said in a thick accent, without turning around.

“Hey!” Wan said, kicking Naito’s chair. “Who asked you?” He popped a whole handful in his mouth and started to munch as the countdown reached “five.”

“Five, four....” Falcon did the honors of the countdown. The engines started up as the landing gears retracted. No one was outside the ship to see it, but the *Orion* floated just feet above the bunker floor.

“Three, two...” LeFay looked over at Clarissa. The former spy looked back. Clarissa could read her mind; she just wanted off Vassar-1. For Clarissa, she was born here. Leaving hurt, but she wasn’t going to show LeFay. She gritted her teeth and turned back around.

“One. Aaaaannnnnd off we go.” Falcon pulled back on the pilot’s stick, and the *Orion* slowly floated up out of the bunker.

“Deploying going-away present,” said Tonga. He pressed a button as soon as they were high enough above the wastes of Vassar-1. A single spherical bomb fell from the bottom of *Orion*. The explosion that followed was powerful enough to kick up sand, dirt, and dust high enough to engulf the ship momentarily, and send debris falling to the ground in a hundred-foot radius all around it.

“Was that necessary?” asked Clarissa.

“Not at all,” Tonga said. “But it was fun. Plus, we don’t want anyone reaping any of the rewards of our exploits left behind.”

Clarissa suspected that meant illegal cargo that they hadn’t been able to sell or offload before everything went sideways.

“Yeah, but aren’t you afraid that someone will hear th—” started LeFay.

“We got company!” Falcon yelled to the crew on the command bridge.

“What are we looking at?” asked Wan as his demeanor changed from laid-back pirate to fighting mode. He leaned forward, staring at the visual display.

“How many of those things are there?” Naito asked, his bravado gone. A large swarm of Shapeless, in the form of UEF fighters, raced towards

them.

“Was slipping out undetected too much to ask?” LeFay said, putting her face in her hands. “You guys just had to blow shit up.”

“Don’t question my methods, cyborg,” Wan said. “Power up the shields. Tonga, it might be a good time to bust out the porcupines. Naito, chart us a fold jump course outta here to the Milky Way. I want a clean one too, outta radar for both the AIC and UEF. I’ll take control of the cannons. Let’s give ‘em the fight they’re looking for.” Wan lowered a visor. The glowing red light inside lit up his face. He smiled as he initiated *Orion*’s cannons.

“What the hell are ‘porcupines’?” LeFay asked Clarissa. “Is that an Earth thing?”

Clarissa shrugged. “A spine-covered mammal?”

LeFay looked bewildered. Clarissa wasn’t much clearer.

Tonga slapped a scope that extended down from the ceiling of the cockpit. “Porcupine launcher,” he said, smiling.

A pair of crosshairs illuminated his face. From what Clarissa could tell, he aimed just above the incoming swarm of UEF fighters. Mumbling to himself, he urged the fighters to get closer, to get within range. A few seconds later, he fired.

The porcupines the *Orion* was armed with weren’t living things, of course. Clarissa had assumed that. They were, in fact, bombs: custom-made bombs with a couple hundred smaller explosives on top of them. Once the primary charge went off, it would send the other projectiles in every direction. If those secondary charges didn’t hit anything to set them off, they exploded at a set distance. They were meant to use against ground troops.

None of the Shapeless sensed the threat of the porcupine bombs, so they just kept flying forward. They discovered the error of their ways quickly enough, though. Eight ships were taken out by the primary explosion.

Next came the secondary explosives. The first of them hit the Shapeless’ faux EUF ships, taking them out in fiery explosions upon contact. Others blew up right next to the alien ships. Those weren’t as devastating, but still did the job. But with a steely alien resolve, the unaffected fighters kept coming, flying straight through the flames, debris, and smoke of their fallen brethren.

“Ain’t it beautiful?” Wan asked. “Good job, Tonga! Falcon, let’s get this party started.” Wan started firing on the Shapeless ships, which were almost

close enough to fire back.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah!” Falcon flipped a switch and the corridors and compartments of the *Orion* were filled with the sounds of ancient heavy metal music.

Clarissa was having serious misgivings about hitching a ride with a crew of maniacs as the music- and adrenaline-fueled frenzy was just starting. Falcon dipped the *Orion* sharply towards the uneven surface of Vassar-1. Enemy fire hit the ground all around it, kicking up clouds of dust. Those that hit their mark were absorbed by *Orion*'s shields.

Undeterred by flying low, the Shapeless' fake UEF fighters followed the *Orion*. They unleashed a hail of gunfire, a blanket of lead that the corsair struggled to dodge. Seeing what was happening, Wan had to make some changes.

“Switch power from the forward shields to the rear,” he growled as he blasted away at the swarm of Shapeless pursuers. “Protect our ass! Falcon, how much further?”

The man was a good shot; Clarissa gave him that. But there were only two main cannons on the *Orion*, which simply wasn't enough to deal with that many bogies.

“A minute out!” replied Falcon. He dodged and weaved through, over and between the mountains and hills of the rugged Vassar-1 landscape. Clarissa noticed he was taking them further and further away from the city, which actually was a good strategy.

“We can help! Do you have any more turrets on board?” she asked. She was so used to being behind the piloting sticks that just being a passenger was hard.

“This is a pirate ship, not a damn dreadnought!”

“Why the hell don't you have more turrets?” LeFay snapped.

“You didn't let me finish,” Wan said. “We have one more, up top.”

Clarissa jumped to her feet, flipping off Wan as she went. “Was it so hard to just tell me that?”

“Now you can appreciate it more,” Wan said with a grin, the red light from the gunnery visor lighting up his features.

But it turned out that Clarissa had unbuckled at the worst possible time. Just as she stood up, Falcon took the *Orion* up and then sharply down, into a deep canyon. Clarissa was taken off her feet, almost hitting her head on the ceiling. She landed on her hands and knees, hard.

Clarissa picked herself up as Wan giggled to himself. “Watch that step.”

It was redundant, but Clarissa flipped him off yet again. She wanted to tell him off, too, but she was afraid that if she opened her mouth she might vomit. She hurried from the command bridge and stumbled through the hall towards a ladder that led upwards. Though she didn’t know for sure, she figured it was the entrance to the aforementioned turret.

Orion was a funny ship. It had a lot of modernity mixed with old tech. Clarissa found the turret on top to be more on the old-tech side. Imported and custom-installed from an AIC dreadnought, the turret on top of the *Orion* was designed to be personally manned. There was a padded chair with straps, which swiveled along with the barrels of the cannon itself.

Clarissa strapped herself in. She didn’t need a viewfinder or an aim assist. The turret was a thick bulletproof glass dome, so she could see all around her, and there were helpful crosshairs in front of the cannons she manned.

It took a little while to get used to firing flak instead of bullets, especially with the nearby walls of the canyon zipping by, but Clarissa managed to zone in on the UEF fighters that were right on the *Orion*’s tail. She took out two or three a shot, but they just kept coming. She couldn’t help but wonder if the Shapeless had an unlimited number of ships to throw at them.

“There, there, over there, watch out for that guy. He’s trying to sneak up on you,” said Blake. Clarissa’s dead husband seemed to make his appearances when she was stressed, which was entirely too often.

“I see him,” responded Clarissa, knowing intellectually that she was talking aloud to herself, but also aware that she was alone in the turret and nobody would care about her random ramblings.

“Look out! That guy over—”

Clarissa shot a couple more flak rounds, nailing a ship that was trying to sneak in close and kamikaze her turret. Its midsection blew open and it spun away into the canyon wall, thick black smoke trailing behind it.

Super-heated high-velocity bullets ricocheted off the turret dome. Each one made Clarissa flinch, but she kept firing. Her artificial eyes scanned everything, told her when to fire and where, which really helped. As the skids and burn marks on the dome increased, though, it became harder and harder to see.

One Shapeless ship completely avoided detection by Clarissa. It popped up from under the swarm and flew straight towards her turret. At the last second, she saw it and shot.

The Shapeless UEF fighter blew apart, but an alien leaped out from the cockpit as it crumbled around it, and jumped on top of the *Orion*. Using limbs transformed into hooks, the creature was for the most part in the shape of a UEF pilot, helmet and all.

“That’s...unexpected,” said Blake.

“That’s a damn problem. But not for long.” Clarissa swung the turret around and aimed at the Shapeless walking towards her on top of the *Orion*. It dodged the initial shots. Then it elongated one of its limbs, made it into a giant cleaver, and cut the barrel of one of the turret’s cannons in two.

Down one gun, she kept firing with the one she had left. What other choice did she have?

The Shapeless easily dodged Clarissa’s fire and reached the bulletproof dome. Then it started pounding away at it. At first it looked like a futile attempt. That was, until it started to crack.

“Okay, if that’s the way you want to play it.” Clarissa waited until the Shapeless was right in front of the bisected turret barrel. Then she purposefully tried to fire it. The resulting explosion blew the Shapeless off the turret and off the ship, though it didn’t die; it simply grabbed onto and was absorbed into one of the swarm.

The blast also managed to blow out the one working barrel. It was useless now.

“How long you planning on keeping this up?” asked LeFay. She could see the obvious. The *Orion* wasn’t going to outrun the fighter ships, nor did it have enough to fight them all off.

“We’re fine,” Wan said, even as the ship banked sharply around an unexpected rock protrusion and Falcon cursed. “Everything is going according to plan. Trust me.”

“Trust *you*?”

“Trust me,” Wan said. “I want to live, too.”

“Here we are,” Falcon said. “Everyone hold on.”

“What the hell do you think—” LeFay didn’t finish her sentence before the ship lurched sideways.

Clarissa realized that Falcon wasn’t just trying to outrun the Shapeless fighters. He was trying to lead them.

Located about a hundred miles out from Vassar-1 were the Storm Canyons. True natural anomalies, the Storm Canyons were massively deep canyons with a deep river at the bottom. That cool moisture, mixed with the heat of the land at sea level, created localized storm clouds filled to the brim with lightning. No one ever flew there for fear of getting struck.

No one, that is, other than Falcon Dotterson.

“No,” said LeFay once she got a look at the entrance to the Storm Canyons. Clarissa had to agree. From her vantage point in the top turret, it was quite intimidating. The grey and black clouds lit up every couple of seconds with bright lightning strikes, and they were so thick that you couldn’t see into or past them. Falcon flew straight towards them, Shapeless in tow.

“Yes,” replied Wan. “Ain’t they lovely?”

“No,” reiterated LeFay. “You’re not flying into that.”

“We definitely are,” Falcon said. “But don’t worry, I’ve done this before.”

“Is that a fact?”

“Once,” Falcon said.

“Better than none,” LeFay muttered.

“When I was a teenager and pretty drunk,” Falcon added.

“Didn’t need to know that part,” LeFay said, shaking her head. “I’d really rather not die out here today.”

“Not today, you bitchy bucket of bolts,” Wan said. He turned to Falcon. “Full speed ahead.”

Falcon glanced sideways at Wan, the control stick bouncing in his hand, and rolled his eyes. “Glad you mentioned it.”

Wan smiled back as though he was enjoying himself.

The *Orion* entered the deep, dark, and dangerous Storm Canyons at a speed no sane pilot would advise. No one on the command bridge could see a thing other than thick black clouds and the glowing—now very much standing out—streaks of super-heated bullets being fired at them from behind. That cannon fire, combined with the random flashes of lightning, created a lethal light show.

Clarissa re-entered the *Orion* command bridge just as the ship took a lightning strike. Not only was it one hell of a jolt to the vessel, again knocking her off her feet, but it took out all the electronics on board.

“Goddammit,” LeFay said. “Don’t tell me I’m gonna die on a damn spaceship!”

“Maybe,” Wan said nonchalantly. Either he wasn’t worried, or he was very good at hiding it. “But not this ship. Naito?”

“Cycling the engines,” Naito said as he frantically tried to restart the *Orion*’s electronics and engines as it glided towards God knew what in the Storm Canyons. “Give me a second, we’ll be back online.”

“Not sure we got many seconds to spare,” said Wan.

“Look!” Tonga pointed at the viewing windows and screens on the *Orion*. The lead Shapeless ship had been struck by the lightning, too; only the lightning had a much more devastating effect on it than on *Orion*. The blast instantly cascaded down to the next ship behind it, and then to the ship behind that. Soon the single bolt of energy had ripped through every Shapeless fighter. It sent them all tumbling towards the waters at the bottom of the canyon.

“Naito!” Falcon shouted. “Need that power!”

They were heading straight towards a long, tall, skinny, jagged rock that jutted out from the river in the middle of the Storm Canyons. If he didn’t get power and engines back, Falcon wouldn’t be able to steer away from it. “Now, Naito!”

“Got it!” Naito said just as the lights on *Orion*’s command bridge came back on and the engines fired back up.

“Too late,” Falcon said. “I can’t pull out of it. We’ll have to scrape by it.”

Every sphincter on the *Orion* clenched as Falcon flipped the ship on its side as they dove down at the big, obelisk-like pillar of rock.

There was a deafening screech inside *Orion* as its belly grazed against the pillar of rock. It was like nails on a chalkboard.

“That didn’t sound good,” Wan offered.

“It wasn’t,” Falcon agreed as he pulled back hard on the pilot’s stick after correcting it back to horizontal. He angled the ship as sharply upwards as he safely could. Some sparks and minor pieces of the ship’s underside fell off as they sped towards the planet’s atmosphere.

“Whew!” Wan took off the red-lit weapon visor and put it back in place. “That was close. Exciting, huh?”

Clarissa felt bile in the back of her throat again, and concentrated on keeping it down. She was relieved to be headed out to space, at least. There

was, she hoped, safety there.

She watched the viewscreen darken as they left the atmosphere behind, and Clarissa felt a little better. “I gotta admit, Falcon,” she said, “you’re one hell of a pilot.”

“I know I am,” Falcon said. “Think I need you to tell me that?”

“And so modest,” LeFay said.

“Simmer down, kids,” Wan said. He took out his mag bracelets. “Naito, we ready to jump?”

“Thirty seconds until jump, Cap,” Naito said as he initiated the fold jump engines, spinning them up. They could all feel the whir beneath their feet.

“Good, good. Oh damn, I forgot. Can someone get our guests some mag bracelets for the jump? Tonga?”

Clarissa got the impression that Wan’s best work involved delegating work to others.

“No problem,” Tonga said. “I got some just over there in the storage shelf. Just gotta—” This time it was the big Samoan who almost got knocked off his feet. The cause? An almost direct hit from a dreadnought cannon. The force was enough that it caused the *Orion* to spin a couple of times.

“They have dreadnoughts, too!” Wan was beside himself.

“I thought you guys knew what you were up against?” LeFay asked sarcastically. After the spinning, she got up herself and looked for the mag bracelets. Tonga returned to his seat.

“What are our options?” asked Wan as he looked at a Shapeless dreadnought slowly flying up to try and close the range between them.

“We can run,” Falcon said. “That’s about it.”

“I know we can run. We’re still running, still jumping, but if we don’t do something and fast, that fat bastard is gonna blow us out of the sky before we can.”

“Hang on.”

“Hang on?”

Falcon seemed to reach out into the space in front of him and swipe randomly. It took a moment for Clarissa to realize that he was selecting from a projected display that was emanating from one of his control panels. She could see the words flashing by now as Falcon flipped his hand. “C’mon, dammit,” he hissed. Then his hand stopped on a file labeled

“pendulum”. He selected it. An image popped up; Clarissa couldn’t be sure, but it looked like there were some big red warning words in there. Falcon swiped it away.

“Like I said, hang on—”

Instantly, the *Orion* swayed left and right around a central point, the thrusters firing in some prearranged pattern, confusing the dreadnought’s targeting systems. Though the giant warship still fired, it kept just missing. That still did damage, though. Wires and screws popped out of instruments on the command bridge from the concussive blasts. All manner of alarms and warning lights and sirens went off.

“Where we at on that fold jump?” Wan asked.

Clarissa shared a glance with LeFay. She wasn’t a big fan of spaceships as it was. LeFay grunted but otherwise stared straight ahead. All Clarissa could do was pray that they’d last long enough to zoom out of there.

“Ten seconds!” yelled out Naito.

Clarissa put on her mag bracelets and pinned herself to her seat. Wan addressed the rest of the crew on the ship so that they did the same, though he didn’t give them much warning. Ten seconds was an eternity when you were getting your ass chewed on by a huge dreadnought, but it wasn’t much time if your life depended on finding a seat and getting your mag bracelets on.

Without wasting a second, as soon as the countdown was done, the fold jump was initiated and the *Orion* and everyone on board were far from Vassar-1.

FOUR

TAKE YOUR SON TO WORK DAY

THE LAST THING Ben remembered was taking his father's hand and being pulled into the black sphere.

He opened his eyes and felt groggy. Had he passed out? It seemed like he'd lost track of time, yet he couldn't be sure.

It was strangely warm and comfortable within the black sphere. It conformed to Ben's shape and weight. Seconds after he got in—or maybe much longer, he really couldn't tell—the sphere rose up into the air. While it wasn't fast, it certainly wasn't slow, either. The massive burning remains of the *Atlas* soon became no bigger than a flaming pinprick in the distance.

Ben didn't truly understand the scope of the destruction on Vassar-1, not until he was high above it with a clear view. And it was near total. All he could see in all directions were flattened buildings and plumes of black smoke. It didn't hit him for a minute or so, but what he was really looking at was a rare sight.

He looked at a dead city.

The whole 'resistance' thing down there was gone, he realized. At least up here, wherever Lee was taking Ben, he was closer to the Shapeless' heart.

Once I figure out a way to turn him back to human, I'll stab that heart and put an end to all this.

Ben silently schemed to himself, and yet he could sense his father looking at him. Could he read his thoughts? "Do you know what I'm thinking?"

"Yes," Lee said.

"Explicitly, or are you just assuming?" Ben asked.

“You’re not yet converted, so it’s pointless to argue with you.”

“Converted? No,” Ben said. “You’re right about that.”

“You’ll soon be convinced,” his father said.

Ben could sense an implied threat in his words. *He’s going to convince me or I’m going to die trying*, he thought. The way his father looked at him made Ben almost positive his thoughts were being read.

The whole black sphere’s exterior was engulfed in flames as the Shapeless transport pierced the Vassar-1 atmosphere. Ben looked on, intrigued by the fact that it survived the exit. In fact, he found it interesting that although the individual aliens were quite susceptible to extreme temperatures, their vehicles were not. Not only could they survive the cold vacuum of space, but they showed no ill effects from exposure to high temperatures and fire as well.

It wasn’t just the differences in the weaknesses between the Shapeless and their ships that Ben noticed. He also realized that there was no way, if the faux *Atlas* was a faithful recreation of the real thing, that he and the others should’ve been able to shoot it down with some well-placed missiles, even without the dreadnought’s shields to protect it. In fact, none of their ships had shields, which told him that although the aliens were near-perfect at replicating living things, they had issues with the inanimate.

“Not much further.” Saito pointed out from the black sphere at a much, much larger one. The bigger silver mother ship of the Shapeless was in Vassar-1’s orbit, just outside the pull of gravity. It floated there, overlooking the recently captured planet.

How are you gonna do it, hotshot? You don’t have any weapons. You sure as shit don’t have any explosives. So what’re you gonna do?

Ben watched the sphere of liquid metal get larger and larger as he and Saito grew near.

“Don’t worry about that right now,” said Saito.

“What?”

“Destroying us. I get why you want to right now, but wait until we get there. Wait until you hear us out, and then make your decision. I promise it’s worth it.”

“I knew you were reading my thoughts,” Ben said.

“You’re my son, whether you want to believe it or not. I know how you think because I know how *I* think.”

Bullshit, Ben thought. That wasn't some parental intuition. That was pure mind-reading. He tried to shut his thoughts down like a curtain, but he found it impossible to quiet his mind.

The black sphere housing Ben and Saito sped through space towards the larger liquid-silver version. A small opening formed, welcoming in the transport. As they were about to enter, Ben realized just how gigantic the Shapeless' mother ship was. At that point it was nearly half the size of the AIC capital planet itself.

When they entered, Ben was met with darkness. As the liquid metal sphere closed behind them, the one that had transported them there let them out. Ben landed on his hands and knees on a cold hard floor. Lee landed on the floor safely.

Ben's heart raced almost as fast as his thoughts. Where was he? What did this thing that was once his father have planned for him? Exactly what did an alien spaceship look like? Under and in between his fingers and knees, the hard, cold floor in the pitch black turned to something soft: a fabric he knew well.

Slowly, light arrived inside the Shapeless mother ship. Ben, still on all fours, looking at the floor, saw a familiar carpet. It was the same one in his parents' apartment back in Annapolis, before it was destroyed. The aliens had even gotten the odd off-beige color perfect.

Ben rose to one knee. He looked around. Sure enough, he was surrounded by his parents' apartment. Everything was exact, down to the details of the pattern on their living room couch. It even smelled like it.

That's when he heard a voice he never thought he'd ever hear again.

It was his mother. "Ben? Benny? That you?"

"Mom?" Ben stood up. Logically, he knew there was no way it was her. He had been there at her funeral. He'd seen her lifeless face in her casket. She was dead and buried in a military crypt back on Earth. But logic meant nothing when he saw his dead mother emerge from the bedroom she shared with his father and walk into the kitchen.

Beverly Saito smiled at Ben, then proceeded to the kitchen, where a couple of bags waited on the counter. She unpacked them as she talked to her son.

"What a pleasant surprise. What brings you by, honey?" she asked, as if they weren't in a living memory on an alien spaceship.

"What brings me...Mom, what are you doing here?"

Beverly looked up at her son, eggs in one hand, a carton of milk in the other. For a split second her eyes shined obsidian, like Saito's, but they quickly returned back to normal.

"I live here. Is that what we're getting today? Silly, goofy Ben? Good. I like that version," responded Beverly with a smile.

"No, I mean *here*, on an alien spaceship."

"Where else would I be?" Beverly's answer was so nonchalant it was disarming.

"I dunno. In a graveyard, back on Earth?" Ben slowly, cautiously crossed his parents' living room towards the kitchen. On his way, he glanced out the window. It was a sunny day in Annapolis. He could see the endless skyline of the megacity, and the occasional military vehicle flying by. Through that window, the real one, a missile fired by a cultist drone had killed Beverly Saito.

"I belong here, with you and your father. And you belong here with us." Beverly left the kitchen and approached Ben.

Ben didn't know what to think. Instinctively he backed up, not ready for any physical touch between him and the thing pretending to be his mother. He was so out of sorts he tripped over the living room table.

"We can all be together again, son," his father said from behind him. Ben whipped his head around. He hadn't even realized Lee had been following him. "A proper family. An everlasting family. None of us will die, none of us will decay."

"A life built on lies," Ben said. "And betrayal. How heartwarming." He stood up. He was never going to give the Shapeless what they wanted. No matter what.

Ben shifted his attention back to Beverly. "I don't know who you are, really, but enough with the theatrics. As tempting as it might be to give in to this...this *lie*, this abomination, I will *not*. Neither would my real father. If it's all the same to you, just get to the point."

Ben hoped he sounded authoritative and confident. Inside, he was as solid as grape jelly.

"I tried to fight it, too," Lee said. He went over to Beverly and put his arm around her. She turned her head and kissed his chest. "I did. But you know what I came to realize?"

"That this is all profoundly creepy and you're a traitor to your whole damn species?"

Lee smiled. "I came to realize that living a lie, a convincing one, is so much better than living a truth filled with nothing but loss."

"That's sick."

"Let me help you reach the same conclusion," Lee said. He raised one arm.

Behind Ben, a part of the floor turned into a living tendril formed from a black oily substance. It rose up and waited, coiled to strike.

"With some help from my friends," Lee concluded.

He lowered his arm, and the tendril darted out faster than Ben could react and snaked itself around his forehead.

"Was he always so stubborn?" Beverly asked.

But Ben barely heard her. His mind was a chaotic jumble of images. He was on his knees, frozen in place. Ben knew in that moment that the Shapeless were invading his mind and leaving his body immobile.

As his vision faded, he heard his father say, "Afraid so, honey. He's his father's son."

FIVE

RECOVERY

ADA DREAMED OF WATERFALLS. Specifically, she found herself whisked away in the warm soft arms of the Sandman back home to Sweden. Her family had a cabin nestled in a fjord on a modest C-shaped beach.

Ada stood on the beach. Her feet sank halfway down in the black sand. She wiggled her toes, feeling the cool grains sifting through them.

In front of Ada was her family's cabin. Built just out of reach of high tide, the modest-looking abode was actually a lot bigger than it looked, and a lot more expensive.

Ada's family came from old money, back before man ventured out into space. Their wealth was the kind where they never ever had to check their bank accounts or be concerned about any bill, even for jet fuel. But she didn't want any of that. When she was seventeen, she'd moved out and gotten her first job and apartment. It wasn't because she had to, or was in an abusive situation or anything like that. She'd simply wanted to make it on her own.

It had been a while since Ada had been to the cabin. It was back before she'd moved out on her own. She had nothing but fond memories of it, though she didn't know why she was here.

Ada slowly walked forward, her feet having gained minds of their own. She looked up and saw a blue sky filled with stars. The moon and sun floated next to each other as if they were old friends, hanging out on the porch of the cosmos. There was no wind, and no sounds of nature.

All Ada could hear was the sound of music and revelry from inside the cabin. She wanted to reach it, but she didn't seem to be making any progress, despite walking towards it. All she wanted, though, was to get

there, to get inside and join in the fun. So, ignoring how hard it was, she kept walking.

Suddenly the sky got dark. Storm clouds rolled in almost instantly, but they weren't grey. They were red, blood red. Ada got hit by a wave of dread as she neared the cabin. Something was coming, but she didn't know what.

An unseen force made Ada turn and look behind her. To her surprise, there was no more water, no more ocean. It was simply black sand leading down into the dry fjord bed. Dying fish used their whole bodies to flop up and down, gasping, struggling to breathe.

Ada heard the creak of a door opening. She turned again towards the cabin, but didn't find herself looking at it; instead, she was already inside. The door slammed behind her.

The cabin was dark, quiet and still. Ada tried to call out to see if anyone was there, but couldn't get the words out. She couldn't even really form them. Only her thoughts yelled out to see if she was alone, and she was.

Again guided by the unknown, Ada moved through the cabin. It was much like she remembered it, only draped in darkness. There was the trophy room, adorned with the heads of dead wild game. The antlers cast long shadows that spilled out into the hall. She walked through her mother's beautiful kitchen. Just like she preferred it, there wasn't a pot or pan out of place.

Ada continued through the halls of her family's cabin, which was a lot longer than she recalled. She passed the doorway to what she thought was going to be her bedroom. Instead, she saw Meryl's living corpse. The dead older woman was in a rocking chair, rocking back and forth while reading a book to the deceased kids she'd meant to protect and watch over during the *Atlas* raid. Upon looking closer, Ada saw that she was reading them the standard-issue UEF Marine manual.

A little creeped out, Ada backed up from the room with Meryl and the dead children, and continued down the hall. At the end of it she saw the star feature in her family's cabin.

Ada's father had chosen this specific location for his family's cabin for a reason. It was built around a natural waterfall. The fjord stood at the bottom of a small mountain. On that mountain, it rained a lot. That rain trickled in a steady stream from its peak down to the water.

The cabin incorporated the waterfall, and even the rock wall it was based on. Ada's father had insisted on not disrupting one aspect of the

waterfall. So it went under the swimming pool at its base, and the stream that led to the ocean snaked under the cabin and went out to sea near one edge of the beach.

What Ada saw as she walked down the hallway was the waterfall, lit up as it often was with a variety of cool colors. The indoor swimming pool, under it but not incorporated, had a light blue glow. When she entered, she saw her favorite feature of her family's opulent cabin: the sky dome.

Partially transparent and part video screen, the dome that was over the indoor swimming pool and the area surrounding the natural waterfall could be programmed. It could look like a cloudless blue sky or a star-filled night. In this case, the latter was running.

No part of Ada wanted to approach the edge of the swimming pool. That feeling of dread that had started when she'd entered the cabin reached a fever pitch. She noticed that she wasn't walking on the tile floor that should've been around the pool, but instead on more black sand. That sand was wet, but stained her feet red. Still, one foot after the other, she moved forward.

Ada stood above the swimming pool. The water was a bit murky, the only light coming from those lights inside on the sides, but it was clear that something or someone was in it.

Out of the water rose a fellow Marine, Tanya Martin. She was the first friend Ada had made when she'd joined the UEF Marines. She was also the first friend Ada had lost.

Tanya didn't look how Ada remembered. Her skin was frozen, cracked, and covered with little shining crystals from the extreme cold of space. Veins popped up, protruding under her skin. Both her eyes were nowhere to be found, replaced with deep black sockets that still felt like they stared straight at the young Swede.

Tanya held out her hands. Ada, again not moving of her own accord, reached out for them. When Tanya's hands opened, the dog tags of dozens of Marines fell into the pool water. Then her dead fellow Marine screamed out.

After her frozen body cracked and broke up into pieces, Tanya was pulled up towards the sky dome. Ada looked up, and the sky dome was gone, replaced by actual space. But there was no time to watch her friend once again get sucked out into the vacuum of the cosmos, because the Swedish ex-Marine's attentions returned to the pool.

Slowly, all together, more bodies rose up from the swimming pool waters. They were other friends and companions that she'd lost since the *Atlas*. Rollins, Francesca, Ace, and more stood on the small rippling waves and stared at her with their dead accusing eyes. In her core she felt their questions: "Why did you let us die? Why didn't you save us?"

Suddenly Ada found herself just feet away from the waterfall. The dead in the swimming pool were still there, staring at the back of her head. Ada was terrified.

The waterfall changed from clear, cold, and clean to red. Ada's eyes got wider; hairs stood on end all over her body. She wanted to turn and flee, but her legs didn't listen to her. They were going to make her stay there and wait for her well-deserved punishment for inadequacy.

Completely catching Ada by surprise, Lee Saito burst out from behind the waterfall and grabbed her by the throat. He kept trucking forward, taking her off her feet and straight towards the swimming pool. The last thing she saw was him, enraged, on top of her, space above him spinning rapidly clockwise, causing the stars to become streaks of light like super-heated high-velocity bullets. Before they went into the water, time stopped. Lee Saito was again the Captain Saito she'd so admired.

"Find us. Save us," pleaded Saito.

Ada was jarred awake. Her immediate reactions were confusion and panic, and she had no idea where she was. Was she still dreaming? Everything was so bright and white. Was this heaven?

When she tried to get up out of her med bay bed on the *Orion*, Ada felt a gentle but firm hand on her chest, keeping her down. Whose hand was it? She saw a stranger, an African woman sitting over her.

"Where am I?" asked Ada. It hurt her to talk. Her lips were so dry they'd split and cracked. Her throat was so dry each word scraped the back.

"It's the tank. Does wonders, but people can get severely dehydrated." The heavily tattooed and pierced African woman picked up a glass of water and offered it to Ada. "Here. Only take a couple of sips, though. You try to gulp it down, you'll choke."

Ada drank the water from the stranger. It felt good. She was beyond parched and the hydration, even as little as it was, certainly helped her talk. And she had a couple of questions she needed answers to, lest she freak out.

"Where am I?" Ada asked again.

“On the *Orion*, somewhere in the Milky Way,” the woman said without further explanation.

“That’s not the most exact locational information,” Ada said. Her head was pounding.

“That’s about all I can tell you. I don’t care much for the command bridge.”

“And you are?”

“Doctor Congo,” the woman said, not unkindly, but all business. She didn’t bother to reach out a hand.

“And what kind of ship is this, Doctor ... Congo?”

“I suppose you people would call it a pirate ship,” Congo said.

Ada frowned. “A pirate ship? Why would Ben want to take a pirate ship? Not that I’m complaining. Thankful to be off that damn planet.” She stretched her arms and yawned. Everything was a bit stiff, a side effect of being immobile for so long.

“Who’s Ben?” Congo walked over to the restoration tank. She pressed a couple of buttons, and the life-saving liquid concoction inside began to drain out.

“Ben Saito. He’s, I dunno, I guess he’s our captain. Defacto leader? Good-looking guy, has a robot arm and leg? Kinda hard to miss.”

“Not ringing any bells, lady. Now, if you wouldn’t mind sitting up straight, lemme just make sure we took care of most of that damage.” Congo pressed another button, and then pulled a lever. The restoration tank refilled with the mysterious cure-all. As it filled back up, she took out a handheld medical scanner and waved it over Ada’s body.

“Clean bill, Doc?” asked Ada as she tried to figure out, in her head, why this doctor on this strange pirate ship didn’t know Ben.

“Not so much, no. You still have a couple of broken ribs. We were able to stop most of the internal bleeding. You’re still in rough shape, though. You need to rest.”

“I’ve had enough rest.” Ada stood up, or at least she tried to. Her legs were still wobbly. Some of her wounds may have been tended, but none of that accounted for all the energy it took to reach that point. She needed food, fuel.

“You should sit back down. Hell, you should *lay* down.”

“If it’s all the same to you...” Ada steadied herself. “I think I’ll go find my friends.”

“Suit yourself,” Congo said. “But if you end up back in that tank, you’re paying for it. That magic juice in there ain’t free, you know.”

Using the walls to steady herself, Ada made her way out of the med bay into *Orion* proper. At first she was alarmed as she made her way through the hallways of the corsair. All she saw were unfamiliar faces, and they were mostly the kind of faces that parents warned children about.

“Ada?”

She spun around at the familiar voice of Tomas behind her. He didn’t look to be in great shape himself. He wore an open short-sleeve button-down shirt that revealed the bandages wrapped around his chest. She could see the strain his body went through, and the pain he still felt, on his forlorn face.

“It’s good to see a friendly face,” Ada said. She hurried over to Tomas as quickly as she could. She almost bumped into a stern-looking bearded man who simply grunted at her. “Excuse me.”

Tomas had to catch Ada as she almost fell over trying to reach him. “Whoa there, Marine. You need to slow down. You were pretty banged up back there. Don’t wanna see you hurt yourself. Need you strong for what’s to come.”

“And what might that be?”

“We’re going to, ah.” Tomas faltered, like he couldn’t quite believe it himself. “Europa.”

“Europa? Why are we going there? If it’s anything like I remember, it’s a damn battlefield. Nothing but death and misery.”

“I don’t think it’s changed much.”

“So why?” Ada asked.

“We have to find that other planet-killer. Clarissa said that’s where it is.”

Ada felt dizzier contemplating that news than she had just traversing the halls of the ship. “What happened, Tomas?”

“Come on. Let’s sit down. You shouldn’t be on your feet yet.”

“So I keep being told, but here I am.”

“I insist,” he said.

Tomas led Ada through a couple more halls and corridors until they reached a shared space. It was a common room of sorts, meant for the *Orion* crew to blow off some steam. There were holographic video games and video screens. A group of ruffians sat around a table, playing poker and terrac. Tomas found a seat for them in the kitchen area.

“Okay, now that we’re sitting,” Ada said, “and I’m not gonna faint or whatever you thought was gonna happen, what went down on Vassar-1? How’d we end up here on this damn ship?” Her head was bursting at the seams with questions.

“The raid on the assimilation center. It was successful, sort of. You... you lost some people, but we took it out before leaving,” Tomas said. He was treading carefully, to Ada’s annoyance, but she tried to see things from his perspective. She probably didn’t exactly inspire faith in her condition to take hard news. She’d just gotten out of a restoration tank, after all, and before that, she’d lost a lot of friends. But she still didn’t like being soft-peddled information.

“Just say it,” Ada said.

“These pirates,” he said. “Their word, not mine. They seem to be, well, I don’t know if calling them ‘friends’ really applies here. But anyway, they’re LeFay’s ‘associates’. She convinced them to give us a ride to Europa.”

Ada felt the eyes of one of the pirate crew on the back of her head. “You’re not telling me something,” she said. She could hear it in Tomas’ voice. Plus, he wasn’t the best of liars, even with special operations training. There was only one question she wanted an answer to, and that she could sense he was evading. “The safe house. I remember going back, but I don’t remember much of anything after I went through those doors. Where’s Ben? What happened?”

Tomas looked around. He wanted to make sure that no one was watching or listening. There was no reason for any of the pirates to know about the Saitos, or what happened with their captain. In fact, the less they knew, the better, at least for the time being. It would stay need-to-know.

“You really don’t remember?” Tomas asked.

The exasperation on Ada’s face must have been clear, because Tomas held up his hands. “Okay. So look,” he said. “You entered the safe house. None of us knew what happened inside, but Captain Saito came out—well, something like him. It was a Shapeless, it had to be, but with tendrils like I’d never seen before.”

Ada frowned.

“And he was holding you,” Tomas rushed on. “Unconscious. Then he threw you down the street with one arm. It was, I don’t know, I’ve never seen anything like that before. Then he beat the shit out of us. I mean, all of

us. Threw my own grenade back at me, hence—” Tomas pointed at his bandages.

“And Ben?”

Tomas looked down at his hands on the table. Then he looked back up at Ada. “He went with him.”

“He *what?*” Ada barked. She saw all the pirates in the break room shift their attention to her. There was some fuzzy image in the back of her mind of her watching him go, but she’d convinced herself that she’d imagined it.

“If he didn’t,” Tomas said, “his father was going to kill us all.” He paused and waited for her to say something. “He did it to save us,” he said at last.

“First of all, that’s not his damn father! The captain died on the sanctuary station. I don’t know what that thing was, but it sure as hell wasn’t Lee Saito.”

“I agree,” Tomas said, but he hesitated. “Ben disagreed.”

“And what, we just left him? We didn’t stick around, figure out where he was taken, and try to save him?”

“We had to get to Europa to take out that weapon. Or at least, stop the Shapeless from getting it. There wasn’t time to stay. He knew that.”

“Bullshit. I’m sorry, Tomas, I really am, but I call bullshit. We could’ve stayed and saved him, or at least we could’ve tried. Instead we ran off and left him at the mercy of that thing that was once his father.”

“There wasn’t time. He would’ve made the same call.”

“He would’ve left any of us behind? To die?” Ada felt the tension in her shoulders. She knew she wasn’t well yet.

“Who said anything about being dead?” Tomas said defensively.

“You really think he can just walk away with those things and be safe?”

“I’m sorry,” Tomas said. “But we weren’t in a position to stop him. None of us were. What happened, happened.”

Ada felt a sick dread in her stomach. “And if something terrible did happen?”

“It didn’t.”

“If it did?”

“If,” he said. “*If* something happened. Then we can’t let his sacrifice be in vain.”

Ada’s hands closed into fists. She clenched them so hard her fingernails dug into her palms, puncturing them. Blood trickled out onto the table.

Anger and frustration had such a strong hold that she didn't notice the long-bearded man approaching them.

"Never seen either of you before," said the man. Ada could smell the strong aroma of liquor and cigars oozing out of his pores. It was stomach-churning, as was his breath.

"We're just hitching a ride, friend. That's all. We won't be here long. Now, if you'll excuse us, we were having—"

"Now, that's not polite, is it? I'm being friendly enough, trying to make an introduction and conversation with some new faces, and I'm met with such rudeness. What do you think of that shit, boys?" The long-bearded man addressed the rest of the crew in the *Orion* break room.

Tomas waited for the rabble around him and Ada to die down before answering. "The name is Tomas. This here is Ada." While not being hostile or rude, it was clear from the tone of the former special operations member that he wasn't amused, nor did he want to escalate or continue this conversation.

"That's more like it. Now we can put names to them strange faces. Me? I'm Josiah Hart. And this here break room, it's been rented out. By me. For our card games. So I'm afraid I'm gonna have to ask y'all to leave."

"We're not going anywhere," answered Ada, her bloody fists pressed against the table.

"That so? Well, little lady, turns out I might have something to say about th—"

Before Josiah could finish his sentence, Ada had already shot up out of her chair. Aches, pains, and injuries be damned, she punched the man in the throat.

Enraged, Josiah tried to punch Ada. She intercepted his swing, grabbing him by the wrist, twisting and applying her own body weight in just the right way to pin the pirate down to the very table she was sitting at. He may have been stronger, but she'd just spent the last few months fighting for her life, while he'd spent the last few drinking.

"What's that about us leaving?" Ada asked calmly as she fought to keep Josiah pinned down.

Josiah's fellow pirates got up, were ready to join in the fighting. They had no intention of fighting fairly, though, and Ada could sense that Tomas recognized the threat of being jumped by everyone in the *Orion's* break room immediately.

“Back up, assholes!” Tomas snapped. He quickly took out his pistol and waved it around. The men who surged forward took pause, then slowly edged a few steps back. It didn’t look like a convincing retreat to Ada, but at least it was something.

“I couldn’t hear you,” Ada said to Josiah as she put more torque on his arm, inducing groans of pain.

“Make yourself at home, love,” Josiah said through gritted teeth. “I insist.”

“Don’t mind if I do,” Ada said. She let go of Josiah. The tough guy rubbed his shoulder, sulked away, and licked his wounds.

The others backed away. Ada glanced at Tomas, who wasn’t ready to lower his weapon yet.

“I think we should go,” Tomas said.

“I do too,” Ada said. “Now where the hell is Clarissa?”

SIX

IMPOSTOR

DETECTIVE SYDAL WAS convinced someone or something was impersonating his wife. It was an illogical conclusion—he knew that—but he couldn't shake the feeling that it was the truth. He was left with two questions.

Maria Sydal sat on the other end of the couch with the detective. Between them was their son Matthew, eight years old, and their daughter Rebecca, five. Their HUDs were all plugged into the same feed for the movie on UEF Channel Five.

Rebecca was in the fetal position on the couch cushions, her little brown-haired head on Sydal's lap. Matthew was fast asleep. Maria stroked his curly hair.

First, Sydal needed to know what had happened to his real wife. If Maria wasn't Maria, then who was she? Where did the real Maria go? Was it just her brain that was manipulated, or was she physically someone else? If it was the latter, how did she look exactly like the woman he loved, had married, and had kids with? And how could not even the kids notice the difference?

"Where's Europa, Daddy?" asked Rebecca. She referred to Jupiter's most famous moon. The Sydals were watching a documentary special on the many battles fought there, and which were still going on in the galactic civil war.

"It's by Jupiter," answered Sydal. He looked over at Maria. She looked back at him and smiled.

The second big question was why Maria had been replaced by whatever smiled back at him. Did it have to do with the murder at Waterman-Lau and

their subsequent flight off the moon? Did it have to do with the cultists? And why her, why him?

Was there a third question? There was, but it was too hard for Sydal to truly consider. What if it was all in his head and the woman who looked, talked, moved, smelled and even made love like his wife was, actually, his wife? What would that mean for him? Had the cancer gotten more aggressive? Was it time to tell her?

“Why is there a war there?” asked Rebecca.

“Remember when you and your brother got into a fight a couple days ago?” asked Maria.

Rebecca nodded, head still on her father’s lap.

“Well, you remember what we said about what to do instead of fighting? How to solve problems with other people, with your brother?”

Rebecca nodded again.

“What did we say?” Maria asked.

“To use our words?”

“Exactly! So you see, these people fighting on Europa, the war, it’s all about them not being able to use their words. So they hurt each other.”

“Uncle Harry said it was because the stupid reebles won’t surrender,” Matthew said. He wasn’t going to be left behind in this conversation that he couldn’t really follow.

“The rebels, buddy. And no, they won’t surrender,” added Sydal.

“Why?” asked Matthew.

Through his HUD, the detective saw real news footage from the aftermath of the battle of Abbottsville, a former AIC settlement on Europa. It was a costly fight that had taken hundreds of thousands of lives on both sides. In the documentary, a statue was shown being erected in the now agreed-upon neutral colony, in honor of all the soldiers that had lost their lives there.

“HUD, turn off channel feed,” ordered Sydal. He stretched his back and yawned. “Because, buddy, some people are just stubborn.”

“Sounds like someone I know,” laughed Maria.

Sydal wasn’t as amused. He gently moved Rebecca’s head off his lap so he could stand up.

“C’mon, honey,” Maria said. “I was only—”

“I know,” Sydal said as he faked a smile. Then he headed for the kitchen.

It wasn't like Sydal to cut family time short. He treasured it. Especially with all the chaos lately, as he was rarely home. The nature of his job meant that at any moment, he could get called into work to come face to face with the worst that humanity had to offer. Any time with his wife and kids was an escape. Now, now it felt like a trap, with something insidious lying in wait underneath.

Maria got up. Sydal could hear her corral the kids as he poured himself some water. All the H₂O on the moon had a strange metallic taste to it. It was from the sanitation plant: the very old, desperately-in-need-of-a-renovation water sanitation plant. He tried to think of what he was going to say, how he was going to act around that thing masquerading as his wife.

Assuming he was right.

"I know. I know. No you can't, not even for five more minutes." Maria picked Matthew up off the couch. "I'll tell you what. In five minutes I'm gonna come visit you in your room. And you better have minty fresh breath, a clean face, and be under those sheets. Or else. You think I'm kidding? HUD, turn on timer."

Sydal slightly enjoyed his metallic-tasting water as he watched Matthew run barefoot across the family room down the short hall to the bathroom. Maria's parental intimidation tactics worked. Satisfied with her actions, she casually entered the kitchen.

"Hey, baby," greeted Maria. She got close to Sydal, a nose away. She put her hands around his waist. It took everything he had not to flinch.

"Hey." There was no love in the detective's voice.

"Put the kids to bed. You wanna maybe open up the bottle of wine we got from my cousin last Christmas? Maybe get a little tipsy?" Maria pressed her body against his. He didn't pull away. "Maybe a little more?"

"That does sound nice, Mare," Sydal said. "But I can't. Not right now. I gotta stay sober."

"I'm sure you can have a glass or two..."

Sydal pulled himself away from Maria's grasp. "Really can't. New regs. Especially with all that shit happening out there in the wake of the company. Seems like a murder a night."

Sydal talked too much and too fast when he was nervous. Maria picked up on it right away. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing. It's just all this craziness out there."

“You know that’s not what I’m talking about,” Maria said. “Ever since that night, when there was that cultist incident you told me about, you’ve been acting weird. Almost like you, I don’t know, hate me or resent me, or...did I do something to piss you off?”

Though he’d known this conversation was coming at some point, Sydal wasn’t ready for it. Not right now, right here. He didn’t know how to even bring up what was bothering him. It wasn’t like he could just come out and ask about what had happened to the real version of her, or where she had gone. Undoubtedly she already thought he wasn’t attracted to her anymore.

“Nothing. A lot on my mind, is all.”

“I’m not buying it.”

“Huh?”

“Bullshit, Rowan. Something is wrong. The way you look at me, your refusal to let me touch you, is it someone else? I can handle that shit. I really can, if you have someone else. But at least be man enough to tell me.”

Maria was calm. If Sydal believed who he was talking to was his wife, he would have been more upset with her words, or more hurt by them. “I’m not cheating on you, Maria.”

“Then what the hell is it?” Maria asked. “Please. I can’t...I feel like whenever I look in your eyes, all I see is anger. And I don’t know what to do. How can I help you? Is it me?”

Suddenly an alert indicating that he was getting a video call appeared on Sydal’s HUD. It couldn’t have come at a better time for him. He still had no idea how he was going to tell her, if he would say anything at all.

“I got a call coming in,” he said.

“So call them back. What the hell, Rowan?”

“It’s from the precinct. Gotta take it. Sorry.” Sydal stepped away from Maria and walked to the other side of the kitchen, as if that small measure gave him any privacy.

“Yeah, go ahead. Take it. Run away again,” she mumbled.

“Detective. I’m not interrupting anything, am I?” On the other side of the video call, Sydal saw a female police dispatcher. He’d never seen her before.

“No, I...what is it?” asked Sydal. He paced back and forth to try to calm himself down.

“We have a call we need you to respond to. It’s a suspected homicide out at the Aitken Basin Crater.”

The Aitken?

Few people, outside of tourists, ever went to the Aitken Basin Crater on the Moon’s South Pole. As far as he knew, there had never been a single death chalked up to foul play: not one in the couple hundred years people had occupied the Earth’s moon.

“Sir? Are you there?”

“Yeah, yeah, I’ll respond. How am I supposed to get there, though? Too late for an LTS bus.”

“If you report to DSH-23, there will be a rover waiting for you, Detective. There, Detective Janis will brief you further. Have a good night, sir.” With that, the police dispatcher was gone.

“Awesome! HUD, end call.” Sydal braced his weight with one hand against the kitchen counter and sighed.

“What is it?” asked Maria. He jumped. He hadn’t realized she was still in the room.

“A call. Out on the South Pole.”

“The South Pole?”

“Yeah.” Sydal quickly poured himself another glass of water and downed it.

“How are you supposed to get out there? At this hour?”

“Don’t worry about it. It’s taken care of.” Sydal walked over to what he considered could still be his wife. Maybe. Maybe she was fine. Maybe he was the one losing it. “I probably won’t be back for a little while. Sorry about...I’m sorry.” He kissed her on her forehead, then turned and walked out.

SEVEN

WELCOME TO EUROPA

WAR WAS STILL VERY MUCH RAGING in the outer bands of Earth's home system between the AIC and UEF. The treaty wasn't just unsigned; it was wholly forgotten by both sides.

It had started with the *Atlas*. Conspiracy theories abounded. Most on Earth simply believed that the invitation to Vassar-1 was a trap, and the AIC were after the tech aboard the dreadnought. But things had started to get stranger, and called those theories into question.

Seemingly random attacks on both AIC and UEF colonist communities, mines, and factories all over human-occupied space had fueled a resurgence in the galactic civil war. There were new offensives in the most war-torn location, Jupiter's moon Europa.

Europa served as a barrier between official UEF space, where they were the strongest, and the wild unknowns of independent space. It was of vital strategic importance to both sides. Plus, at that point, securing Europa was more of a symbolic victory than anything else.

When word reached AIC generals off-planet, and the UEF government, about the invasion of Vassar-1, both militaries were turned up to their highest alerts. The AIC, understandably furious, vowed revenge and sent almost the whole remainder of their fleet towards Europa. They needed to take control or take out the moon to facilitate the movement of troops to Earth. If they didn't, catch cannons—deadly weapons capable of shooting ships out of their fold jumps—would obliterate them.

The UEF, thoroughly confused, didn't understand why the reports they were getting from Vassar-1 said that their ships had attacked the AIC capital. Their only conclusion was that their war hero and senior military

official, Captain Lee Saito, had gone rogue. For whatever reason, he'd been able to gather a fleet, and had chosen to take out the rebel capital.

In response to the approaching AIC threat, the UEF had sent reinforcements to Europa. A blockade now existed around the moon.

And the *Orion* was now face-to-face with it.

"And this is why I try to stay out of the damn home solar system," Wan said as he stared at what everyone on the bridge did: a seemingly impenetrable ring of UEF ships, fighters, battleships, and dreadnoughts around green Europa.

"This doesn't look good," Tonga said. The weapons expert had a flair for understatement.

"There must be thousands of them," Clarissa said.

"Hot damn," Wan whistled. "It'd be beautiful if it wasn't so damn intimidating. Falcon, is there any way through this?"

Falcon glanced over at Wan, who had his legs up over the armrest of the captain's chair. "You mean like a way to sneak through? Are you out of your goddamned mind? Look at it! There's no way to sneak past them."

"No reason to get offended at the question," Wan said, enjoying the exasperation in Falcon's voice.

"Well, this is unexpected," LeFay said. She stood next to Wan's chair, arms folded, looking unimpressed.

"That's one way to put it," Wan said. "How important, dear LeFay, was it to actually get to Europa? I mean, we can drop you off at one of the Jupiter stations, or even get a little further in. Mars, maybe?"

"No, we need on be *that* moon," Clarissa said.

"Of course you do," Wan said, rolling his eyes. "But the thing is, I don't really want to die on this little errand, so—"

"Whatever it takes," added Ada. She stood in the doorway to the bridge, bracing herself on the door frame.

"'Whatever it takes'," Wan said. "Sorry, pretty lady, but that policy only applies to getting y'all off my ship and the rest of us as far from all this as possible." He pointed at the viewscreen. "Nothing out there wants to be our friend."

"They don't know you're pirates," Ada said.

"First of all, we're independent merchants," Wan said, wagging his finger. "And secondly, of course they know what we are."

"How?"

“How does anybody know anything?” He raised his hand as Ada was about to object. “And don’t forget your two buddies Claire and LeFay are AIC spies. What do you think is gonna happen if one of those thousands of ships decides to come take a closer look at us, hmmm? Imagine that going well?”

“There has to be another way,” LeFay said firmly. “And don’t give me that shit about there being too many of them. I’m sure ‘independent merchants’ like you have a way to get around this.”

“Usually we have security contacts on worlds we do business with,” Wan said.

“But there usually isn’t a gigantic blockade around those worlds before we get there,” finished Falcon.

Wan nodded. “Falcon makes a fine point.”

Wan sat up straight in his chair. He sighed and stretched his neck, cracking loudly. “Sorry, LeFay. We can’t do this. I know I said we could get you there, but hell, look at ‘em. I can’t put my crew’s lives on the line just so you can go on a quest to save us all from aliens.” Wan shrugged. “We have to think of ourselves on this one. Self-preservation and all that.”

“We *must* get on that moon,” protested Ada.

“I don’t think you understand,” Wan said. “The answer is no, pretty stranger. We can drop you off at the nearest Jupiter station. You’ll have to find a ride from there. Best we can do.”

“And I don’t think *you* understand,” Ada said. “If we don’t get to that moon, find what we’re looking for, and destroy it, there isn’t going to *be* any safe place left in the universe. Jupiter stations, Earth, Mars, Vassar-3, the Outer Rim, nowhere will be safe from those things that burned down your home. Because they aren’t going to stop. If they get their hands on what’s down there on that moon, they’ll have the ability to blow up a—” Ada was cut off by Tomas, who arrived right behind her. His timing wasn’t a coincidence, she realized, when she looked over at him and saw the “shut up” look on his face.

“Sorry, lady,” Wan said. “I wish you luck, I really do, but this ain’t our fight, so we ain’t gonna die in it. Falcon, plot a course for the nearest Jupiter station. Use the Waterman-Lau ID codes. They’ll just think we’re freelance delivery fliers.”

“With pleasure,” Falcon replied. He used the nav system in his highly advanced HUD and pinpointed the coordinates to the nearest Jupiter station.

The Jupiter stations, in the gaseous planet's orbit, were much like sanctuary stations in that they were neutral ground, free from fighting. That said, each station was operated by private companies, who were often funded by either the AIC or UEF, so depending on your allegiance in the war, you had to choose your station carefully. It wasn't unusual for, say, AIC spies to get discovered, be subdued, and wake up in UEF prisons if they chose the wrong one.

As Falcon went about redirecting the *Orion*, LeFay silently rebelled. Yes, the pirate pilot had evolved and installed a highly advanced system and plugged himself into it surgically. She was one step past that. Those highly advanced systems were literally built into her body. Infiltrating a foreign OS and taking control of some of a ship's functions, well, it was child's play for her. It was one of many reasons she was among the AIC's elite assets.

"Okay, we got clearance for Jupiter Station Vector. Heading there now," Falcon informed them as he started to turn *Orion*. But before he could get very far, an alert sounded inside the bridge.

"What the hell is that?" asked Wan.

LeFay smiled as she stared straight ahead through the bridge's viewing window.

"Sir, one of our missiles has been armed."

"Well disarm it."

"I can't!"

"What do you mean—"

"I'm locked out. I can't override it!" Tonga panicked as he realized a missile was armed, loaded, and ready to fire, and there was nothing he could do about it.

"I'm getting us out of here," Falcon said. But before he could complete his turn away from the blockade, the missile fired.

At least he'd managed to angle the corsair around so the errant missile wasn't fired at any UEF ships. But the resulting explosion in open space did catch the UEF Navy's attention. In less than a minute from the time it was shot, a compliment of three fighter ships left the blockade and approached the *Orion*.

"What the hell was that?" Wan asked. He actually got up out of his chair. He must be really angry for once, LeFay thought.

"It just did it," Tonga said, completely bewildered.

“There was definitely some pushback on the controls,” Falcon said. “Someone else must’ve taken control of the ship.”

Wan spun to face LeFay, but before he could say anything the Orion’s bridge speakers came to life. “Attention, unidentified corsair. This is Cpl. Kelly from the UEF 113th Space Force. Identify yourself.” The hail was from one of the fighters that drew closer with each passing second.

Wan pointed angrily at LeFay. “You did this.”

“I don’t know what you mean,” she said. “But it looks like our options are limited now. And one way or the other, we better make for that moon. Who knows if we’ll have another malfunction like that?”

Wan muttered under his breath as he leaped back into the captain’s chair.

“Attention, unidentified corsair,” boomed the voice from the bridge speakers again. “Identify yourself immediately. You have five seconds before we consider you hostile and will open fire.”

“Now what? You got a plan? Or did you just sentence us all to death?” Wan glanced at his pilot. “Falcon, can we jump away?”

“The engines need some more time to cool down.”

“I don’t care what they need. What can they do?”

“They can fire now,” he said. “At least, I think so. But those fighters will easily match us.”

“Wait for it,” LeFay said. Her digital fingers deep in every communications network for millions of light years in every direction. The powerful computer that was her brain processed and sorted out those that mattered, that were relevant to their current predicament.

“We can’t wait for anything now, thanks to you,” Wan snapped angrily. “Can we fire on them to create separation and make a run for Jupiter? If we plunge into all that gas and shit, that should scramble their radar, right?”

“Three seconds,” warned the UEF fighter.

“I doubt we’ll even make it into the planet’s orbit,” Falcon said.

“Two...”

“Wait for it,” insisted LeFay again.

“One. Unidentified corsair, shut down your engines right now, or we will open fire.” The three UEF fighters reached the *Orion* and surrounded it, their cannons and missiles pointed straight at the pirate ship.

“What the hell are we waiting for, LeFay?” hissed Wan. “You have some magic trick you want to share with the group?”

“As a matter of fact...” she said.

There was a series of loud booming noises out of nowhere. More and more came, until it became one long extended sound. Ships—AIC warships, fighters, battleships, and dreadnoughts—appeared all around *Orion*.

“We’re waiting for them,” answered LeFay. She hurried back to her seat and strapped herself in. “Ship’s all yours again,” she said. Then she winked at Wan. “I mean, if you ever lost control or anything.”

Wan shook his head. “Um, Falcon.”

“Yeah, boss?”

He saw what everyone else on the *Orion* saw: that they were about to be in the middle of maybe the largest space battle in the history of mankind. They needed to get out of here before they became collateral damage.

“Kindly get us the hell out of here.”

The sheer amount of ships out here in the space outside Europa was staggering. Their little corsair was nothing compared to what must have been, collectively, over ten thousand vessels.

“Yeah,” said Falcon. “I think I’ll do that.”

Wan sat back down in his chair and slowly buckled his seat belt as his eyes stayed glued to the unbelievable sight outside.

Falcon, also mesmerized, managed to turn on the shields and slowly descend. The UEF fighters that surrounded the *Orion* were already well on their way back to their friends.

“Guys, you might want to take a seat,” suggested Clarissa. She pointed to the wall, where there were more fold-out seats. Ada and Tomas took her advice, sat down, and strapped themselves in.

Wan swallowed hard as he and his fellow *Orion* passengers watched one single missile fired from one of the AIC dreadnoughts. They watched the little white dot, with a blue glowing exhaust behind it, make its way towards the UEF blockade. What made them nervous wasn’t only that the first shot was fired, but that they knew it was a mini-nuke.

The UEF blockade knew that a mini-nuke was heading their way as well. Naturally they opened fire, trying to shoot it before it reached them. They succeeded as a huge bright flash was followed by the almost dreamlike visual of an atomic explosion in space. It got close enough to take out a good amount of their ships. As soon as the explosion dissipated,

it was on. Both sides went off on each other, and the Sixth Battle of Europa began.

Watching a space battle unfold was a surreal experience, even for those that had been in one before. Not only was it the world's deadliest light show as super-heated high-velocity cannon rounds were exchanged back and forth in every direction, but there were explosions; missiles whizzed by, and debris and bodies were always everywhere. But this was all in silence, in the vacuum of the great void.

Falcon had his work cut out for him. Though he had no intention of joining the fight, he had to dodge, roll, and dip around all manner of projectiles, and even ships themselves.

"Orders, Captain?" Falcon's artificial eyes darted left, right, up, and down as he did his best to avoid cannon fire and missiles, which looked to be fired with reckless abandon. An AIC fighter got hit and blew up right in front of *Orion*. It was too close to avoid, so Falcon plowed through the blast, rattling the ship. Thankfully the shields held up.

"Don't get us killed feels about right!"

"There's only one way through this," Ada said to the others under her breath as Wan and the others worked to stabilize the ship.

"We got to go through it and head straight to Europa," LeFay said.

"And you think we can do that undetected?" Ada said.

"In this chaos? Absolutely," she said.

"You planned this all along, didn't you?" Clarissa asked, even though she already knew the answer to her own question.

"I know. I'm brillia—" LeFay was interrupted as the *Orion* took a violent hit. Thankfully it was from one of the cannons from a smaller warship, a UEF man of war, not a dreadnought. Otherwise they'd be dead.

"Yeah, super smart," Clarissa said. "In no way is this suicidal."

"I hear y'all chatting back there," Wan said. "Any suggestions?" His knuckles were white as he gripped the armrests on his chair. Apparently there was a limit to how exciting he found all this.

"Head for the moon!" LeFay yelled back. "There's no way we can reach any of the Jupiter stations or back out of this fight!"

Wan heard LeFay and looked out the bridge's viewing window. It was pure, unadulterated chaos. Ships were being blown up left and right. There weren't any more sides. The AIC ships were intertwined with the UEF ships; only their ID beacons would be able to tell them apart.

A thick and deep wall of cannon fire stood between *Orion* and Europa.
An even bigger one stood between *Orion* and Jupiter.

“I hate you, LeFay,” Wan said. “I really do!”

LeFay just shrugged.

“Can you make it?” Wan asked Falcon.

“I can try.”

“No pressure, but it’s all on you.”

“No pressure,” Falcon said.

EIGHT

INBOUND

THROUGH FALCON'S EYES, the Sixth Battle of Europa was a vast expanse of math equations. He wasn't like Clarissa, where his piloting skills came from instinct and reaction time. No, everything was calculated to him.

In a split second, his advanced HUD plotted a course through the chaos at an angle and speed that, according to the math, would get them through, out and clear, behind the UEF blockade. But that was if everything went according to plan and prediction. In war, one could rarely if ever count on those two things.

Falcon had to punch it to get through the maelstrom of floating death. Without warning he pushed hard on the accelerator, and let the computers he'd installed into his body take the piloting stick.

"Put on your life-support masks," he ordered. "Turning off all unnecessary systems and redirecting that power to the shields. And hang on. This is gonna be rough."

At first, though going fast, it seemed like the *Orion* wasn't being pushed to its limit. That was about to change.

Everyone aboard the *Orion* heard Falcon's order. Everyone obeyed. As they were marked by clearly visible blue boxes, it was easy to find life-support masks anywhere on the ship. Without delay, they put them on and prayed for the best.

As soon as his calculations demanded it, Falcon pressed the accelerator to the max. It was as hard as he could possibly push the engines without risking total and complete failure. Those on the bridge were pushed back into their seats by the gravitational forces that echoed those felt on the

fastest of fighter ships. Those unlucky enough to not already be sitting down were thrown off their feet into whatever was behind them.

It wasn't about just going fast. Falcon also had to maneuver around the countless hazards all around *Orion*. Life and death was a matter of split-second decisions and actions. If his body's chemicals weren't carefully regulated via computer programs, his adrenaline would have been spiking. His eyes would've been wide and bloodshot as he avoided close call after close call, and he would've been drenched in sweat.

Instead, Falcon was focused, calm and working ahead of himself. He let his custom programming handle what was happening in the moment as he tried to figure out three or four moves ahead. That was an effective system for the normal circumstances he often found himself in. It was great for running from authorities, finding safe routes in and out of restricted areas, staying undetected. But it wasn't so great for flying through a massive battle involving countless variables that were all thoroughly unpredictable.

Falcon dramatically pitched *Orion* to the right to avoid a UEF fighter that screamed by, firing its cannons at an AIC fighter behind it. There was no time to think about his next move as a burning fighter he couldn't identify came straight towards the pirate corsair. He had to take just as dramatic a turn to the left. Tonga threw up in his life-support mask.

As Tonga cleaned his own vomit off his face, he unbuckled his seat belt. He needed to get another mask, or he was gonna be real short of breath real soon. Much to his dismay and physical well-being, seconds after unbuckling his seat belt, the *Orion* collided with another ship.

Falcon couldn't avoid the oncoming UEF man of war. The *Orion* was going so fast, with two extreme turns, that it couldn't physically handle another immediate one before leveling off. Realizing this, he quickly redirected more power to the forward shields and hoped for the best.

The *Orion* hit the side of the man of war and bounced off. Luckily the shields absorbed most of the impact, only leaving slight denting on the front of the corsair. But it spun the smaller vessel, leaving Falcon desperate to regain control and Tonga flying around the command bridge.

"Fuuuuu—!" yelled Wan, muffled by his life-support mask. Looking through the viewing window was nauseating, but he and everyone else on the bridge did it. Tomas and the captain both threw up as well.

Tonga's body ragdolled around the bridge. His head was gashed open on the edge of a console. One of his arms broke as he was thrown off his own

seat. He only came to a stop when he ran into LeFay, who grabbed and gripped onto him, securing his head and torso, only leaving his limbs free to flail.

“Hang on!” yelled Falcon. He was in a bit of a pickle. Somehow, somehow, he’d have to level *Orion* out. Otherwise it would spin apart and, worse, everyone on board would pass out. Maybe even himself. Augmented as he was, he was still human, with a human brain, with human blood running through those veins.

What options did Falcon have? The main engines were still too hot. The landing thrusters were all he had, and even though they weren’t supposed to be used at this distance since he’d be on fumes later, he had them both firing at max. He could shut off the thruster on the side of the *Orion* going into her spin, and hope that would even them out, or he could completely shut off the landing thrusters and go into a free fall. Then, all at once, he’d have to accelerate hard, fast and sudden. The problem was, they weren’t in a void, a perfect situation where there was open space.

Falcon wasn’t sure what had hit the *Orion* during their spin. It could have been flak or a missile. One of the smaller ships—but bigger than a fighter like the man of war they’d collided with—or a carrier could have hit them. Whatever it was, it wasn’t big enough to destroy them or completely take out their shields, but it was enough of a shock to the system to render the pirate ship dead in the water.

“At least it stopped spinning,” pointed out LeFay. She looked down at Tonga, who was in rough shape. One arm was pointed and bent in the most unnatural way. His face was a crimson mask, and the vomit mixed with blood on his chin and shirt. “Boy, you are a mess. Let’s get you one of them masks.”

Tomas reached into one of those blue containers and grabbed an extra life-support mask as *Orion*’s bridge still spun in his vision, even though the spinning had slowed down dramatically. He swallowed down his own vomit and handed the mask over to the barely conscious Tonga. The big man wasn’t even cognizant enough to take it from him, so it fell to the bridge floor.

“What’s...?” Wan had to get hold of himself. Like Tomas, his world was like a whirling dervish. His stomach—full of liquor and cheap snacks—was unstable at the moment, to say the least. “What’s, uh, going on here, Falcon?”

All the power to *Orion* was off. The engines were cold. The thrusters were dead. Wan's precious ship was little more than a floating target / bullet sponge in the midst of space combat Armageddon. Worst of all...

"No power, no shields, no weapons, no engines," answered Falcon as he tried to find a solution to the ordeal, of which the seriousness was being severely downplayed.

"Sounds non-ideal," said LeFay.

"No shields?" Wan asked. "No shields?"

Having no shields out there during the Sixth Battle of Europa was like jumping the fence into the lion's cage at the zoo, naked, with premium raw steaks attached to your person. Eventually, something was going to go very badly, and people were going to die.

"I'm working on it," Falcon said. He was flustered and felt himself trying to control his breathing. Sometimes Wan forgot that Falcon wasn't like the rest of them. This ship wasn't just something he rode. He was attached to it.

"Emergency power?" Wan asked unhelpfully.

"Everything was diverted to the shields," Falcon said. "Like you ordered."

"Pump it!" Clarissa spoke up from the back. No one answered her, so she spoke a little louder. "Use the manual charger! Pump it as hard as you can!"

Orion, like almost every spaceship, had precautions against losing power. There was a literal pump under the pilot's console that, when pumped, used friction to charge and re-spark the engine. The only problem was that Falcon's hands were attached to the controls, so he couldn't do it.

Clarissa recognized Falcon's physical disadvantage and got up out of her seat. Fighting the dizziness that came with *Orion*'s spinning, she finally made it up front to him. She sat in the copilot's seat, the one chair on the pirate corsair that almost never saw any use. Falcon wasn't big on sharing.

"What're you...?" Falcon looked over at Clarissa as she strapped herself into the copilot's chair.

"Saving our asses. Gonna re-spark the engines. Be ready to get us the hell out of here." Clarissa reached under the console and felt around. For a second she panicked when she couldn't find the pump. A quite realistic fear set in. What if, in all his custom work, he'd had the pump removed? They'd

be properly screwed. But then, to her relief, she felt a pump handle with her fingers.

With everyone's lives quite literally on the line, Clarissa grabbed the pump and started pumping as vigorously as the angle and the muscles in her arm would allow. She could feel the resistance, which was good, but it made the act hard. If the engine didn't re-spark, she didn't know how long she could physically keep trying.

Suddenly the lights and instruments flickered back on.

"Nice," Falcon murmured.

But they were far from out of the fire. Falcon took control back and broke the *Orion* out of its now slow spin. In a matter of seconds he had to find a new path, a new course to get out of the battle and to Europa. Luckily his customized brain plotted one in half a second.

For Falcon it was simple. His HUD laid out a holographic path or trail that he just had to follow. It would change, of course, to compensate for any obstacles, but as long as he stuck to it, he should get them out of the fight.

Everything went fine right after the *Orion* regained power. Falcon stuck to the path, and other than some jukes and dodges, it looked like their luck was about to change. But then the biggest weakness of Falcon's HUD's navigation assistance became glaringly and terrifyingly apparent.

The holographic path or trail in Falcon's HUD could only chart what was within his line of sight. Through all the maelstroms of battle, there was still a pretty thick line of UEF ships blockading Europa.

"Falcon?" Clarissa asked. She, like her copilot and those on the *Orion's* bridge, saw the seemingly impenetrable line of UEF ships. Not one of them budged, or even looked to make an aggressive move towards the pirate corsair. It wasn't a threat, but that didn't mean it wouldn't blow them into bits at the slightest provocation.

"I see it."

"Okay, well, what are we gonna do about it?" Clarissa went over possible solutions in her head. None of them were particularly good.

"Hold on, looking for a route through."

"How long do we have until the fold jump engine is recharged?" asked Wan.

"I don't know, let me..." Clarissa looked for the info on the *Orion's* instrument HUD.

"One minute," answered Falcon.

“What’re you thinking?” asked LeFay from the back.

“We’re gonna do a short fold jump, like really short.”

“A fold skip?” Clarissa had heard of the maneuver before. She’d never done it, though, because it was obnoxiously dangerous. No one did it, which might make it the perfect choice to get through the blockade.

“Exactly.” Wan wiped the sweat from his forehead. “Can we do it? Falcon, can you find a clear path?”

“Way ahead of you.”

In order to make a short fold jump, the *Orion* needed a little room and a path clear from ships or other obstructions. Unlike a regular jump, they wouldn’t be making a big fold, so there wouldn’t be any skipping over any obstacles or enjoying the luxury of the mostly open universe.

“We need to make a little room before we can get there,” Clarissa said. She noticed, through her and the *Orion*’s HUD, the place Falcon had marked as the start point of the fold jump. It involved having to go into the blockade only slightly, so that they could reach that open path.

“Got it.” Falcon made the *Orion* take a sharp turn away from the UEF blockade. Two UEF fighters noticed them, and gave chase.

The *Orion* shook a bit as its restored shields took several hits from the fighter ships behind it. They were only using their cannons, which was good. If they used their missiles, there would’ve been more reason to worry.

“Time to squash some bugs. HUD, bring up rear cannon weapons system.” Clarissa switched from the copilot’s screen to a camera-assisted view from the rear of the ship.

Clarissa, unlike Ada or even Ben, had no reservations about taking UEF lives. After all, she was technically AIC, born and raised with that military and government. So there was no hesitation in opening fire on the pilots who were simply just doing their jobs.

“If I see them in hell, they’re going to have to wait in line, babe,” Clarissa said quietly as her dead husband stood next to the copilot’s chair, looking over her shoulder.

Falcon noticed Clarissa was talking to herself, but paid it no mind. He was too busy doing a loop around at a downwards angle. His concern wasn’t only getting rid of their tail, but also reaching the fold jump point in one piece. The battle around them was only getting worse, more violent.

There were more new obstacles for the *Orion*. Debris from disabled and destroyed ships was everywhere. Most harmlessly bounced off the shields

but bigger chunks, from downed dreadnoughts and battleships, presented bigger dangers. Frozen human corpses floated in the same positions they'd died in.

After blowing away an AIC fighter in front of them, Falcon had the *Orion* on the pre-selected path for their fold skip. Clarissa's shooting kept the fighters pursuing them at bay. Once on the path, the fighters stopped firing at the pirate corsair, out of fear of hitting their allies in the blockade.

"Spinning up the engines," said Falcon. Under the bridge of the *Orion*, everyone felt the vibration from the fold engines starting up.

Falcon spotted the opening between UEF dreadnoughts that he aimed the *Orion* at. There was no guarantee that it would stay open, so he sped towards it, again pushing the corsair's abilities to their limits. Getting there was a hell of a nail biter as the fighters behind them caught up. If they fired a heat-seeking missile from there, they would surely connect.

"How much longer?" asked Wan.

"Almost there," Falcon reassured him, though his lack of confidence bled through into his voice.

"Brace for incoming missile!" Clarissa tried her best to shoot down the fighters on their tail, but hitting a very fast fighter-class ship mid-flight was extremely hard. If you included the fact that the base from which she was firing was on everything but a straight line, it was almost impossible.

From her viewpoint, she saw one of the pursuers fire a missile. It was indeed a heat-seeker.

"We can outrun it!" Falcon wasn't going to stray from his path. "Jumping now!" He activated the fold jump engines.

Both of the ships that pursued the *Orion* collided with the dreadnoughts from the UEF blockade, but the missile they shot jumped along with the pirate corsair, as well as chunks from those same dreadnoughts, crippling one of them.

The passengers and crew of the *Orion* were pinned back in their seats for the second or so of the fold jump skip. As soon as the ship came out of it, they were already in Europa's atmosphere. It had worked, but it had taken a toll on the corsair.

There was one main drawback of fold skipping, and that was the strain on the vessel doing it. During a normal fold jump, a ship had enough time to gradually slow down at a safe rate before and after coming out of the fold in time and space. During a skip, all that trauma came at once.

First to go was the shields. After that, different parts of the *Orion's* exterior crunched and broke off. Smoke billowed out of every newly opened hole in the hull. Almost all of its systems were in disarray.

"We made it," Wan said. He sounded surprised. "Tell me you can land my baby in once piece."

"She's already in a few pieces," Falcon said. But they were out of the battle up in the space outside Jupiter's most lush moon. Whatever happened here was better than up there. "But I'll try."

From Clarissa's view, all she saw was a blue sky with a faint light show in space, far, far away. Then, out of nowhere, the heat-seeking missile appeared.

"We got a problem!" she shouted. "That missile followed us through."

"What? How?" Wan was apoplectic.

"Don't ask me," Clarissa said.

But Falcon knew it was theoretically possibly, especially in a short jump. He'd just never imagined it could actually happen. That mean the missile must be very, very—

"It's right on our tail!" Clarissa said.

Falcon saw it flickering in the rear camera even before the computers, coming back online from the jump, blared an incoming missile alert through his HUD. "Can you shoot it?"

Clarissa tried using the rear guns, but they didn't respond. She looked at Falcon in surprise.

He just nodded grimly. "Damaged in the fold skip."

"Then what do we do?"

Falcon raised his chin so his voice carried in the bridge. "Brace for impact!"

NINE

BLAST FROM THE PAST

WHAT IS THIS?

Ben woke up in the back of a cab. He looked to his right, outside the window, and was surprised to see the Earth, to see the megacity of Annapolis slipping by. He looked down and saw his own hands and lap, but they were so much smaller, like a child's. More alarming, but also comforting, was that they were all flesh and blood, not metal and mechanical. He looked to his left and was surprised to see his mother, Beverly Saito, sitting right next to him. Her purse was on her lap.

Ben didn't understand how he'd gone from Vassar-1 back to Earth, and in a smaller body. It didn't make any sense. What made even less sense was the fact that he recognized the situation and setting he was in. He'd been here before. It was the day his family had moved to Annapolis.

"So where you from, sir? From your accent, pretty clear you ain't from 'round here." Ben heard a voice from the other side of the cab's bulletproof glass that separated the back seats from the front. It came from the cabbie, who flew the vehicle along the sky paths that served as roads for the megacity. From what Ben could see from behind, the cab driver was bald and wore a trucker's hat.

"Japan, originally," answered Lee Saito, who sat in the front passenger seat next to the driver.

"Japan, huh? Would never have guessed. Your English, it's perfect."

Lee politely laughed. "Thank you. It's from a lot of time with the military. They don't really speak anything else."

"Well, good thing they didn't, because you sound like a genuine American. Really. Mean that as a compliment, sir."

“Thank you.”

“First time in Annapolis?”

“No, not mine. But my wife and son, it’s their first time.”

The cab driver quickly glanced back into the back seat, and made eye contact with Ben. Ben immediately noticed the driver’s eyes; they were all black, and shone like obsidian. That, he didn’t remember.

Ben felt his mother’s soft warm hand on the thigh of his jeans. The cab driver turned back around, and he looked over at his mother. She smiled at him. Then she pointed out her window.

“Look, Ben. That’s where your father’s going to work.”

Ben unbuckled his seat belt and climbed over and onto his mother. He looked out the window. There was the Annapolis he knew, with one glaring difference. Where the main UEF base was supposed to be, there was the fake UEF *Atlas*: the same one he’d helped blow up back on Vassar-1.

This isn’t right.

Confused, Ben climbed off his mother’s lap and back into his seat. Something about all of it was off, twisted.

“What’s wrong, honey?” asked Beverly, concerned.

“Nothing...I...” Ben didn’t know how to answer.

“Here we are! The Montcrief Apartments,” said the cab driver as the cab came to a stop.

Ben didn’t know how they’d gotten there so quickly. Just a second before, they were still flying through the skies of Annapolis. The doors on both sides of the vehicle swung up and open.

Like most parking spots in the megacity, the lot for the Montcrief Apartments was a large concrete block that hung off the side of the tall building. This particular building had six of seven lots servicing the different levels. The Saitos, while not poor, at this point were far from well off. They were on level twelve, safe from the dangers of the slums below, but far from the open sky views of the upper levels.

As Ben stepped out of the cab, gone were the amazing views from high above Annapolis. They were replaced by a forest of skyscrapers in every direction, and the smells and sights of the lower inner city. He remembered it all being very overwhelming when he was younger.

Beverly grabbed one of her son’s hands. They walked next to Lee as they approached the entrance to the Montcrief Apartments. Something urged Ben to look back right before they reached the doors. Behind him he

saw the Pale Man standing where the cab once was, smiling and waving at him.

“What’s wrong?” asked Beverly. She noticed Ben had stopped, which caused a pulling at her arm.

Ben stared at the Pale Man. He knew that he knew him from somewhere, but he couldn’t put his finger on where. All he did know was that simply seeing him filled him with a sense of menace and danger.

“He’s nervous. New place and all.” Lee grabbed his son’s other hand, and together the parents led Ben through the apartment building’s doors.

The halls of the Montcrief Apartments were very much like Ben remembered. Below his little feet was a dirty carpet that pretty much never got washed. The halls were scuffed from people moving in and out. There was this strange, almost mildew-y smell.

“What number are we?” asked Beverly as the small family made their way through the halls.

“1242,” answered Lee.

Ben looked up at the numbers on the doors they passed. He couldn’t make them out. They looked more like glyphs or characters than numbers. He’d never seen anything like them before.

When Ben looked down the hall, one of the doors opened. From the open door he heard strange sounds, horrible sounds, like dying animals. Out of it came a man that looked familiar. He closed the door and walked towards the small family.

“Sorry, excuse me,” said the man as he pressed against the wall so the Saito family could pass.

Ace?

Ben knew that he knew the man. He was the spitting image of Ace, only without the scars, and with a markedly more pleasant demeanor. His dead friend smiled and nodded at him as they passed, his shirt covered in blood.

“What is it?” asked Beverly. She wasn’t asking Ben, but her husband.

“I don’t. Something is off. I think it’s malfunctioning,” answered Lee. Little Ben had no idea what they were talking about.

Beverly looked over at her husband. “Does he notice?”

Lee looked down at Ben, whose head was still turned, looking at Ace. Then he looked up and over at his wife. “I think so. We should speed this up.”

“Got it,” agreed Beverly. Suddenly a door appeared in front of the trio, cutting off the rest of the hallway. Ben thought it was 1242, but it was hard to tell because, again, the writing on the door was so foreign.

Ben’s parents were gone. It was just him. He was a little bit older, a pre-teen. Under one arm was his hoverboard. They were dangerous little things, but his father wasn’t around enough to notice he even had it, and his mother—well, he loved her, but she was a bit of a pushover.

When he reached for the door, it opened on its own, revealing the Saitos’ apartment. Ben stepped in. It was dark except for the light in the kitchen. He’d been out all day, so the curtain of night had already enveloped Annapolis. On the kitchen counter, Ben noticed an open bottle of wine and two glasses. Each glass had remnants of pinot noir left behind.

“Mom? Dad?” Ben, still holding his hoverboard, walked further into the apartment, towards the hall that led to his bedroom, his parents’ bedroom, and the bathroom. The front door slammed shut on its own.

Ben could hear music playing from his parents’ bedroom. He also saw a light under the door. Curious and naive, he slowly made his way down said hall.

Before he made it too far down the apartment hallway, Ben saw and heard the bathroom door opening on its own. Steam came billowing out, as if someone had left the shower on and hot for a while. Naturally he stopped in front of the open doorway, and wanted to see who was inside.

The steam parted as if blown away by an invisible ghost. There in the shower, which for some reason had no door, was Ada. She was completely naked, and seemingly unaware of his presence. Confused and turned on, Ben watched as she lathered her shapely body with soap. Then, she stopped.

Ben backed up a little bit, clutching his hoverboard to his chest as Ada made eye contact with him. She smiled and stepped out of the shower towards him. Just feet from the doorway, she stopped and opened her mouth. Bullets fell out, clanging against the tile bathroom floor.

Ada knelt down, water dripping off her nude figure. With one finger she beckoned pre-teen Ben closer. He leaned in.

“I’m waiting for you. I’ve always been waiting for you,” whispered Ada. With that the bathroom door slammed shut, almost hitting Ben on the nose.

That’s...is this a dream? Ben stared at the closed bathroom door. The steam that had previously billowed out of it got sucked back under the crack

of the door. It was getting harder for him to stay conscious and keep any semblance of control. He almost felt like his mind was being manipulated.

“Ben.” He heard someone call his name. He walked away from the bathroom. Now his bedroom door was open, the lights on.

If someone gave Ben a thousand guesses as to what he was going to see and get confronted with in his bedroom, he would’ve never even gotten close. Standing there, with its arms behind its back, was something that looked like, or more accurately *was*, in the shape of a boy about his age, only the boy’s skin was jet black. He was bald and had general, bland facial features. That was, all except for his eyes. The boy’s eyes were large, oval, and wide. Not only that, they glowed yellow.

Of course this shocked and scared Ben. He turned to run away, and did. But he only made it a few steps before he was somehow in his room, standing next to his bed.

“Ben, please don’t be scared. I need to be quick. Otherwise they’ll find me. They’ll know,” said the yellow-eyed boy.

“Who...” Ben’s voice quivered. “Who are you?”

“I’m your father. Sorry, I’m one with your father.”

“What do you mean, you’re ‘one with’ my father?” Ben asked.

“That is not important. What is, is that he is still there.”

“What do you—?”

“He’s not dead. He’s not like the others. Which is why I can be with him,” the boy said.

If Ben wasn’t already confused and confounded by what was happening, he sure as hell was now. The yellow-eyed boy, despite his appearance, felt friendly. His voice, his presence, it didn’t have the same menace as the Pale Man or any of the Shapeless, though this yellow-eyed stranger was clearly not human.

“We weren’t always like this. We’re not all like it now. They shouldn’t be able to do this. They took it from us.”

“The Shapeless?”

“Find one. They need them to survive. Find the rock and you can separate me from your father. You can have him back. You can have them all back.” The yellow-eyed boy looked scared. “I have to go. Find it!”

With that, the strange kid turned into a puddle of black oil on the floor and seeped down through the floorboards and disappeared.

Okay? Whatever the hell that was. Ben tried to figure out who the yellow-eyed kid was and what the hell he'd meant by anything he said. Thing was, even though it didn't make any sense, he felt that he would never forget what the kid had said.

Ben was back in the hallway. Both the bathroom and his bedroom doors were closed, bereft of light underneath. Once again he was on the path to his parents' room.

This time pre-teen Ben had to open the bedroom door. He opened it slowly, as he heard noises he didn't know at that age, but would come to know well later. He'd know the smell, too.

Ben cracked his parents' bedroom door open and saw his father in bed, on top of someone, having sex. Only that someone wasn't his mother. He'd later find out she was a fellow soldier that Lee had started seeing while posted in Europa. He'd also later find out that she wasn't his father's only mistress. What he never knew was how aware his mother was of her husband's marital transgressions.

Without warning, Ben's parents' door flew open. Lee Saito and his mistress sat on the bed, calmly watching as the pre-teen was sucked towards their window by an unseen force. He crashed through it, body flailing as he plummeted towards the lower levels of Annapolis.

Instead of hitting the ground, Ben landed butt-first in a chair in the UEF Naval Academy. He almost hyperventilated, he breathed so hard and heavily. Sweat poured down his face as his heart raced, pulse pounding. Just moments ago, he'd thought he was going to die. Now he was in class.

Standing in front of the class was the Pale Man. Dressed in a UEF Naval uniform, the Pale Man looked the part. Behind him was a digital holographic chalkboard. All over it were drawn pictures, diagrams, and writing, all pertaining to the AIC.

"Nice of you to finally join us, Mr. Saito," said the Pale Man. All of Ben's classmates turned and looked at him in unison. It was creepy as hell. "Now we can get started. Today's lesson is about our enemy, the rebels of the AIC and how we can destroy them. Mr. Saito, what can you tell me about planet-killing weapons?"

TEN

IT'S ONLY JUST BEGUN

SYDAL RODE in the passenger seat of the rover sent to take him to Aitken Basin Crater. The driver was Detective Janis. She was eating something from a paper wrapper. The chronically thin detective was always eating something.

“You sharing that?” Sydal asked.

She took another bite. “It’s synthetic chocolate,” she said. “You’d hate it.”

“Pass it over.”

She did, and Sydal took a bite. That and the sickly-sweet synthetic made him want to gag.

“Told you so,” she said, taking the candy bar back and taking another bite.

“How do you eat that shit?”

“I had to eat something. You think I planned to get dragged out here tonight?”

Sydal grunted. He couldn’t argue with that. “I’m guessing you had a couple beers, too.” He could smell it on her breath.

She shrugged, ignoring his question. “So when was the last time you came all the way out here?” Janis asked as she drove a little too fast across the lunar surface.

“I dunno. How’s about you slow down a bit, huh?” Sydal already had enough on his mind. The last thing he needed was having to worry about dying in a rover crash, although it might alleviate the torture of thinking his wife wasn’t really his wife.

Janis rolled her eyes. “I’ve got this under control. What are you worried about? Hitting another rover? Look around you, Rowan. Ain’t a damn thing in sight.” Janis popped the last piece of synth chocolate in her mouth and threw the wrapper over her shoulder into the back of the rover. Then she pulled out a pack of gum and popped a pungent piece in her mouth. At least it covered up the smell of booze on her breath.

Sydal couldn’t argue with his partner’s logic. When he looked out the rover windows, all he saw was the empty white and gray of the moon. In the distance, far away, he saw the Earth. It looked like a marble from here.

“Want a piece?” offered Janis.

“No, I’m good. How much further?”

“According to my HUD, we should be there any second now.”

The rover went up a hill, and when it reached the top, both of the detectives could see a truly awe-inspiring sight. Craters on the moon were usually reserved for the richest of lunar citizens. With their wealth, they built and lived in oasis communities far away from the hustle and bustle under the main Lunar Dome. In fact, they were so well off they’d built their own plasma dome over the whole crater. But their financial feats didn’t end there.

The Aitken Basin Crater was unique in that the people who lived there and had built it had made it into a greenhouse. High above them, at the top of the dome, was an artificial replacement for the sun, bathing the community in UV rays. That, mixed with a system that extracted water from under the moon’s surface, made it an oasis of green on a dead moon.

“Over there. That must be where we get in.” Sydal pointed at a small building right outside the Aitken Basin Dome. It served as an entrance and processing point, necessary for the tourists who came to see the community’s splendor, and also as a filter to keep out any undesirables.

“Right-o.” Janis drove the rover down the hill, straight towards the domed community.

When they pulled up, Janis stopped right before the front of the rover got rejected by the plasma dome. A holographic woman appeared in the window of the building, right next to their rover. She pointed at a sign on the window that had a frequency for the detectives’ HUDs to tune into so they could talk.

“Hello. Welcome to Aitken Basin Community and Nature Walks. I’m Irene, how may I help you today?” asked the woman.

“I’m Detective Janis, and this is Detective Sydal,” Janis said. “We’re from the LPD. We need to get in. Got a call about a homicide. Sending over credentials right now.”

“Very good,” the hologram said as the digital badges were processed. “Welcome, detectives. Please proceed along the red dotted line. It will take you directly to the scene. Our community leader, Fredrich Bausman, will greet you.” With that, the woman opened up a small section of the plasma shield right in front of the detectives’ rover.

“I mean, it sucks that we’re here on a homicide call, but damn, if this isn’t one of the most beautiful places I’ve ever been,” whispered Janis as the rover slowly drove along the holographic red dotted line.

Vast amounts of vibrant green vegetation, trees, and flowers flanked them on both sides of the road. It wasn’t just plants, though. When Sydal lowered his window, he could hear the sounds of birds, insects, and small mammals. Every fifty yards or so, they passed the entrances of hidden driveways that led down to hidden homes, camouflaged by the thick green of Aitken Basin.

“Yeah...it’s something else,” Sydal said.

“C’mon, man, cheer up. People pay a hell of a lot of money to enjoy this place. We get to see it for free.”

“Because we’re investigating a homicide,” pointed out Sydal. “It’s not a damn holiday.”

“What’s got your panties in a knot lately? You’re never exactly a ray of sunshine, but you’ve been extra miserable lately.”

Sydal stared out his window. Through a small clearing of trees, he could see the other side of the crater. Homes were anchored into the lunar surface fifty feet deep, kept them from sliding down. No rain meant no mudslides, though a humid atmosphere was constantly maintained to keep the plants healthy. Sprinklers installed along the ground, under the soil, provided the water they needed to survive.

“Sorry, it’s just...got a lot on my mind.”

“There’s your problem, bud. Me? I make sure to keep the old grey matter empty. Leads to a much happier life, being blissfully unaware.” Janis took her attention away from the narrow road and looked over at Sydal. “A great trait for a detective, I know.”

Sydal chuckled. “Criminals beware.”

“Laugh it up,” she said. “This dumb detective gets a good night’s sleep.”

“I’m sure you do.” *Must be nice.*

The detectives’ rover followed the holographic path until it stopped at a line of trees and what looked like the entrance to a trail. There were other vehicles there: two, to be exact. One had no markings at all but was definitely expensive, a luxury version of a lunar rover. The other had the markings of Aitken Basin security.

“Is this it?” asked Sydal.

“Looks like it.” Janis pointed towards the trailhead. The holographic red dotted path led into the trees.

Both detectives got out of the rover. Sydal stretched his back. While doing so, he looked up. Past the artificial blue of the dome, he could see faint stars, a barely visible reminder that they were indeed on Earth’s moon, not on Earth itself.

“Detectives?” A squirrely-looking middle-aged man emerged from the trail entrance. He was dressed in a track suit and had a slight limp.

“Yup. And you are?” asked Janis as she shook the squirrely-looking man’s hand.

“Fredrich Bausman. I’m the community leader here at Aitken.” Fredrich moved on to shaking Sydal’s hand. He had a thick German accent, but spoke perfect English.

“Sydal. So, Fredrich, what do we have here?”

“Right to business, eh? Well, that’s good, because things like this...they don’t happen here very often, and we’d like to have this wrapped up as soon as possible. Every minute we’re closed is another lost tourist. Come, this way.” Bausman headed back towards the trail opening.

Both Janis and Sydal looked at each other for a moment before following Fredrich. They both had the same thought, which wasn’t necessary to verbalize: *Why is this guy so worried about tourists when one of his residents was murdered?*

“Usually, this time of year, this place is packed. People looking to escape the winter back on Earth, or spacefarers looking for a stop before returning home. We get all sorts of folks here. One reason they come here is to escape the problems on other parts of this moon, or in the galaxy. This is supposed to be a safe place, free from crime and violence, an oasis in the desert of space.”

Bausman seemed to love to talk. As he led the detectives down the trail, they let him speak as much as he wanted. They were investigators, and information offered to them for free, without probing—especially when the provider didn't know that that was what he was doing—was perfect.

Sydal didn't enjoy the green oasis of Aitken Basin. Where others might've found it an escape, he saw it as nothing more than an elaborate lie. Plus, he was well aware of the types of people who could afford to live here. In his view, the wealthy didn't accumulate their wealth by being good people. All of it—the towering trees, vibrant wildlife, and colorful flowers—was built off the suffering of common men. Add to that the fact that some of those same common men actually paid to come here, and he found the whole place despicable.

“So what can you tell me, Fred? What are we walking into?” asked Janis.

“Of course. Of course. The victim's name is Sophie Wright. One of our residents found her while out on a jog. We don't know how long she was out here. This trail is rarely used by visitors, since it's so far in, and this particular stretch was closed off due to some construction we were doing.”

“Construction?” inquired Sydal.

“Mmmhmm. We started a new project a little less than two years ago. More accurately, *I* started it. You see, one problem that we have out here is also a strength: we're in the middle of nowhere, far from the Lunar Dome and the dark side. This started becoming a problem, as some of our supply deliveries and even tourists were getting hijacked by pirates. Which, is anything being done about that, by the way? A lot of our residents are scared to leave these days.”

“Pirates? Yeah, we're working on it,” Sydal lied. Pirates were the least of the police department's problems. Plus, they operated so far outside the Lunar Dome and the dark side that many on the force didn't consider it their issue to resolve. They were the price of living on the lunar frontier.

“Good. Good. Anyway, where was I? Yes, that's right. I commissioned the company to build a tunnel that led from the Lunar Dome to Aitken, and vice versa. That meant closing sections of the trails so that workers could safely work underneath. The last thing we need is sinkholes swallowing up our guests or residents. Since the section that Mrs. Wright was found in was one under construction, we think that she might've been there maybe for a day, maybe more. We don't know how long she's been there.”

“The company? Waterman-Lau?” asked Sydal.

“Of course. What other company is there?” laughed Bausman.

“Can we talk to them? The resident that found Mrs. Wright?” Janis switched from jovial borderline alcoholic to investigator.

“I’m afraid that’s not possible,” answered Fredrich.

“I’m afraid we aren’t just asking.”

“They’re gone.”

“What do you mean gone?”

“They were sent home.” When the detectives and the squirrely German man turned a corner on the trail, they were met by a woman in an expensive-looking suit. With her were what looked like hired bodyguards. Lying there in the middle of the trail was a dead body.

“I’m sorry, you are..?” asked Janis.

“Hello, lady and gentlemen. My name is Anita Lau.” The woman in the expensive suit gave the two detectives a polite smile. There was no handshaking, though.

“Lau? Like the company?”

“That’s right. I’m Don Lau’s eldest daughter, and in charge of our operations here on the moon.”

I should’ve known, Sydal thought. The docks, their exodus, and now this? These bastards smell rotten. “I was under the impression that Waterman-Lau left the moon,” he pointed out.

“We have, for the most part. At least our offices. But we still have many interests here. After all, we built the lunar colonies.”

“Why move your offices?”

“I’m afraid that’s a corporate matter, and not terribly relevant to this current situation. And this is a situation that we have a vested interest in.”

Sydal gave Lau a sideways look. He raised one eyebrow. “The tunnels? What’s that about, anyway? Does the UEF know that you’re building secret tunnels underneath what’s still *their* moon?”

“Yes, they do know. They hired us. And no, the tunnels aren’t our immediate concern, Detective. What is, is that Mrs. Wright was our liaison between the company and the military operations, specifically the ship docks. So naturally her death, her murder, is of grave concern to us. Especially since our contract with the UEF has never been more important ,in light of recent events.” The way Lau talked, it was almost robotic. She was a corporate robot.

“You’re so sure it’s a murder?” Sydal walked away from Anita while talking. He approached the dead woman in the middle of the trail.

“Please, take a look yourself, Detective. Give us your expert opinion.”

Sydal joined Janis, who was already investigating Sophie Wright’s body. “Shit,” he said. “What the hell is this?”

“Not much decomposition,” Janis said.

“That’s not exactly the first thing I noticed, Detective,” Sydal replied.

“I kinda figured,” she said.

Something or someone had torn Sophie Wright to shreds. Literally. She resembled pulled pork, only much bloodier and more disturbing. In fact, she was in such a horrendous state that Sydal wondered about the identification.

“How are you sure it’s her?” asked Janis.

“Sure as we can be until we get biotests back,” Lau said nonchalantly.

“All residents have implants,” Bausman said. “Similar to HUDs. They’re meant to make access to Aitken easier. Instead of having to deal with security, they simply approach the entrance; their implant is read, and the dome opens up. We scanned her as soon as we found her.”

Bausman, unlike Lau, was clearly disturbed by the dead body. He refused to look at it, and held a handkerchief over his mouth.

“I’ve seen this before,” whispered Sydal.

“The docks?” Janis asked.

Sydal nodded.

“Shit. I saw something like this too, a couple of days ago.”

“You mean the Flanders case?”

Janis nodded.

“Something stinks here. And I think the company is involved,” Sydal said, keeping his voice low.

“Agreed.” Janis winked at Sydal. They both knew it was time to divide and conquer.

Sydal stood up. “Okay, Fredrich, I need you to get a tarp or something, cover her up. There should be a meat wagon on its way.”

Fredrich looked sick at the thought. “Of course, Detective.”

Sydal looked at poor dead Mrs. Wright. His HUD took pictures and a full 3D scan of the scene that he could revisit later, after they left. Before they left, though, they had some more snooping to do.

“But first, I need you to show me the entrance to these tunnels.”

“What?” Fredrich looked taken aback by this request. He glanced at Lau, who retained her casual pose.

“The tunnels,” Sydal said. “I want to check them out. How do I get in?”

“That’s not very safe, Detective. Like I said, they’re still under construction. Perhaps I can—”

“Again, Mr. Bausman, this is not a request,” Sydal said carefully. “Refuse to show me the entrance, and you’ll be interfering in an active police investigation and obstructing justice. Do you understand?”

“No,” said Lau.

“Excuse me?” Janis asked. She noted the bodyguards, who took a step in her direction, and countered it with a step of her own toward them. That stopped them in their tracks. It also brought her closer to Lau’s personal space, but the young woman wasn’t shaken or intimidated.

That hardly surprised Sydal. She was a top executive in the biggest company in the universe.

“We understand that you have authority as the police,” Lau said smoothly. “But I have an agreement with those above you, in the military. Lunar police are not to interfere in company affairs. In return, we provide funding to your department and are obligated to report any crimes committed by Waterman-Lau staff, and/or on company grounds. You have no right to explore our property, especially when a crime hasn’t been committed on said property. You can call your superiors if you wish. I’m sure they’ll agree with me.”

“That’s an...interesting interpretation,” Sydal said. “And one I’m not sure my bosses would share with you. If you want to call my superiors yourself, be my guest, but I’m going down into those tunnels.”

Lau raised an eyebrow. “Oh?”

Sydal smiled. “Or all of you are coming back with us in cuffs. I’m sure we won’t be able to hold you, but I’m sure someone of your status would like to be spared such an embarrassment.”

“That would surely reflect badly on yourself,” Lau said. She shifted her arms imperceptibly. Sydal was once again struck by how everyone had buttons that were incredibly easy to push if you just found them.

“I’m used to it,” Sydal said with a wink. “The bar is pretty low for me.”

Lau frowned. “I see.”

“I’m—I’m sorry, Ms. Lau,” Bausman said. “I’m not going to jail for this.” He nodded to Sydal. “I’ll take you.”

Sydal had been so busy leaning on the threat of embarrassment for Lau that he hadn't realized that the threat of jail time, however unlikely, had caused Bausman to practically break out in hives.

Then again, Bausman was a small, meek man, and he was the leader of the Aitken Basin community. If he was arrested, that would surely hurt his chances to get re-elected.

"What's the problem, Ms. Lau?" Janis sneered. "Do you have something to hide down there?"

Lau turned her head away, probably to escape the smell of stale beer breath mixed with minty gum. "You're making a mistake," she warned.

Her two bodyguards stepped forward again, and again Janis stepped up to meet them. "Maybe," Janis said. "But I've got a lifetime of them. What's one more on the pile? Go on, Rowan. I'll deal with Ms. Lau and her two goons."

The goal was to have some alone time with Bausman, but Sydal was worried about Janis. More specifically, he was worried about what she'd do while he was gone. "Sounds good. Don't shoot anyone."

"I make no promises. Get out of here."

"C'mon, Mr. Bausman," Sydal said. "Time to show me that entrance."

ELEVEN

MOONSIDE

KELSO SAT IN ENGINEERING, strapped in with three other members of *Orion's* crew. He was still trying to recover from the fold skip, whatever that was. It was probably concerning that the chief engineer didn't know; but what he did know was how to fix things, and he knew that considering what the ship had been through up to then, he'd be needed.

He felt sick and light-headed. He closed his eyes tight and moaned from distress. No one knew for sure what was wrong with him, but he hadn't always been like this. Though he didn't remember it, Kelso had once been normal.

HE'D WORKED at one of the dozens of shipyards on Vassar-1. Once upon a time he'd had a wife, a sister he took care of, and a dog named Rusty. Then the war came calling for him.

Kelso had been drafted into the fighting. He was sent to a mining planet on the outer edges of human-occupied space, called Garan. It was important to both the AIC and UEF due to its rich mineral deposits, including the same metal both sides used for ammunition in their guns and ship cannons. The rare, mildly radioactive material was becoming more and more scarce as the fighting neared two decades.

First in any fold jump came the uncomfortable queasy feeling. Then came extreme g-forces, enough to pin him back in his seat. He hated it. Despite not being able to remember it, Kelso had hated it back before he'd become disabled and a pirate.

While on Garan, Kelso had survived several battles, mainly because he wasn't on the front lines. His job before being drafted had provided him skills in repair and shipbuilding that the Navy desperately needed. All night and day, ships would come in to their headquarters requiring all manner of maintenance and fixes. The worst cases involved him and his fellow Navy engineers cutting out dead or dying pilots, so that the fighters could be used again.

As was often the case in the most recent years of the galactic civil war, the AIC was losing. The same held true on Garan. Kelso was working on a day that didn't seem out of the ordinary. He and the other Navy engineers had no clue that the UEF had broken through their lines and were heading straight towards their HQ. A single bomber made it through unscathed and dropped its payload on top of them.

A piece of the HQ garage ceiling had fallen on top of Kelso's head, splitting it open and rendering him unconscious. At first he was listed as KIA. This news was relayed to his wife back on Vassar-1, who didn't take it well. Two days after getting notice from the AIC military, she had taken her own life, not willing to go on alone.

THERE WAS another big jolt as the *Orion* came out of the fold skip. Immediately Kelso knew there was something wrong. Sparks were flying all over engineering. Wires shorted, and some instruments just straight up exploded. Smoke quickly filled the relatively small quarters. He, along with the other pirate engineers, quickly unstrapped themselves and went to work trying to repair the damage.

KELSO HAD WOKEN up on a medical ship. His head was wrapped in bandages, doing nothing for his pounding headache. Worse, he didn't know who he was or where he was. After freaking out, he was eventually sedated by an AIC medic.

On his way back home to Vassar-1, it was explained to Kelso that he'd been injured and was being sent to live with his sister, the same sister he used to take care of. He also was given the news that his wife was dead, but he wasn't upset. He'd forgotten he had a wife, or even a sister. Hell, he

didn't even know his own name. What he did remember, though, was machines, ships, and how to repair them.

A MISSILE HIT the rear of the *Orion*. That was unfortunately where engineering was, right next to the engines. Kelso turned to hear a loud cracking sound. Then he watched as, in a split second, the back wall of engineering ripped off, sucking out his fellow engineers. He managed to grab onto a nearby pipe.

KELSO'S SISTER wasn't equipped to take care of herself, let alone her older, now disabled brother. She was a drug addict and couldn't hold down a job. He couldn't find work because of his mental state. No one trusted him to work on their vessels. It was only a matter of time before they became homeless.

THE PIPE that Kelso grabbed was extremely hot. It was part of the engine exhaust system. As his hand burned, he howled in pain. His grip started to slip. Then it did, and he found himself being sucked out of the pirate ship he'd called home for over a year now.

ONCE THEY WERE on the streets, Kelso's sister further succumbed to her demons. Perhaps they were made worse by her situation and the responsibility of having to look after her big bro. Eventually she couldn't take it anymore, and had abandoned him. She'd ended up dead a month later from an overdose in the Bowery.

KELSO WAS TERRIFIED AT FIRST, as he spun end over end in the air high above Europa. In his spin he caught glimpses of the lush green and

black soil of the terraformed moon. It was hard to breathe—not only because of the altitude, but because his screams robbed him of his oxygen.

KELSO WANDERED the streets of Vassar-1 looking for any food he could scrounge or scrap he could sell. But given his mental state, he wasn't doing well. It wasn't until Wan came across him after a night of drinking that his fortunes changed. Wan had seen the AIC engineer tattoo on his arm as he'd held out a cup looking for credits. A veteran himself, the pirate captain knew how good Navy engineers were, and had offered to give him a tryout instead of a handout. Kelso had agreed. That was how he'd come to be a member of the crew.

EVEN IN HIS lesser mental state, Kelso knew he was about to die. The ground below came rushing up at him as he stopped spinning and stabilized more. He looked and saw the *Orion*, a big trail of smoke behind it, trying to make a landing on Europa's surface. Part of him, the part that was still whole, was relieved to see that the ship and his friends were crashing. Then he closed his eyes and saw his wife and sister.

Thankfully, he didn't feel his end. He simply became a bloody smear on a moon full of corpses.

“CAN YOU LAND IT?” asked Wan in a panic.

Falcon didn't answer. He had better things to focus on besides Wan's blathering. They'd survived the missile strike, but the blaring sirens and flashing lights on the command bridge made it clear they wouldn't be able to fly much further.

“Well?”

Falcon sighed. Not only did he have to stabilize the *Orion* long enough to be able to land instead of crash, or at least crash with style, but he also needed to find a proper spot to set down.

“We got this!” Clarissa answered before Falcon could. He smiled to himself. He was starting to like the brash woman. He hadn’t flown with anyone in the copilot’s seat in a long time, but she’d done as well as any had, and with any luck, they just might manage to deliver the rest of the crew to the ground in one piece.

“What she said,” Falcon said.

With a combination of good flying, good luck, and the very last fumes of fuel in the landing thrusters, Falcon and Clarissa managed to land the old corsair in the middle of a large field.

Knowing Europa, it was probably covered in mines and booby traps, Falcon thought, but at a glance all he could see was that it was covered in bluish vegetation that grew out of black soil. There wasn’t a building in sight. There also wasn’t a soldier or tank in sight. Falcon was starting to think it was a miracle—

“We made it!” Wan said triumphantly.

“You were a big part of it,” LeFay said sarcastically. She and Ada were still in the jump seats. She held the crumpled form of Tonga in her arms.

“Agreed,” Wan said, a big grin on his face.

Then he started coughing violently. It was so bad he fell out of his captain’s chair. He landed on all fours, coughing up blood that splattered on the floor of the deck. Then he fell on his side and curled up in a fetal position, still hacking up blood.

“What’s wrong with him?” asked Clarissa urgently.

“Shit, not again,” Falcon said. “Somebody go get the doc!”

WAN WOKE up in his own ship’s med bay. He looked to his left, and in the bed next to him was Tonga with a bandaged head, chemically knocked out by Congo, who was nowhere to be seen.

This wasn’t the first time the captain of the *Orion* had had a major coughing fit like that. It came along with his condition. He’d been taking good care of it lately, but all the excitement had stoked it up again.

“Would you like me to tell you a story?” Congo said from the doorway of the recovery room.

“No,” Wan said.

“It’s about a captain with Eruvian Lung who never listened to his doctor.”

“I said *no*,” Wan reiterated. His throat was scratchy, and he had to concentrate hard to hold off a fresh coughing fit. “I’m fine.”

“You’d be surprised how many people end up in here telling me that,” Congo said.

Wan got up, fighting off the light-headedness that he felt. He grabbed his gaudy coat and jewelry off a hanger near his bed. His crew was in a dangerous place. Making sure that they survived was his only priority at the moment, his own health be damned.

“Don’t suppose me telling you that you need to lay down will dissuade you,” Congo said as she put his arm around her neck to help support his weight as he left the medical bay.

“I need to get us off this damn rock before they find us,” said Wan.

“I’m afraid that’s not possible at the moment.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Wan finally couldn’t hold off, and coughed a couple of times. But it wasn’t too bad, and passed quickly. He looked up to find Congo studying his face closely.

“I guess you’ll live,” she said. “For now.”

“All that work on your bedside manner is really paying off,” Wan wheezed. “Where is everyone?”

Congo sighed. “They’re outside.”

“Take me to them.”

“Captain,” she said. “Walking around the ship is one thing, but that atmosphere—”

“Take me outside, Doc.”

Congo shook her head, but she reluctantly helped Wan towards the loading ramp. As they went, they passed by the completely obliterated engineering room. All that was left was a large hole ringed by jagged metal and frayed wires.

“What the hell is that about?” Wan asked.

“Don’t worry about it right now,” Congo said. “You don’t need to elevate your stress levels. We’re working on it.”

Wan snorted. “Don’t get stressed. You’re a real riot, Doc.”

“I try,” she said.

Wan reached the ramp and gingerly walked down it. The first thing he felt was the uncomfortable humidity of Europa. It was harder to breathe,

due to less oxygen in the air.

“Are you okay?” Ada asked. She looked at Congo. “Is he okay?”

“He’s fine,” Wan barked, louder than he should have, and had to fight off another coughing fit.

“He can’t come with us,” LeFay said bluntly. She, like the others, was checking weapons and changing into green and black camouflage ponchos that they’d found in *Orion’s* storage.

“Like hell I can’t!” Wan pushed himself away from Congo. His intention was to try and look strong, but he stumbled on the foot of the ramp and managed to fall to his hands and knees in the dirt.

“Sure you are,” LeFay said dismissively. “You coming, Doc?”

“I can’t,” Congo said, shaking her head. “I can’t just abandon my patients. Not even the stubborn ones.”

“No,” Wan said, still on all fours. He looked at a sprouting plant barely an inch out of the soil. “Go with them, Congo. They’re going to need all the help they can get. The others can look after me and Tonga, and fix my goddamn ship while they’re at it.”

“Captain...”

“Oh, ‘Captain’ nothing! Go! Help them stop whatever those things are. Otherwise we’re gonna have nowhere to go unless you wanna live on the Outer Rim, and screw that.”

Congo helped Wan back onto the loading ramp. Before he went back inside, he turned to LeFay. “You owe me, tin tits. Don’t you forget it.”

LeFay shrugged. “Fair enough.” She gave Wan a once-over. “Try not to die, short stack, so I can pay you back.”

“I’ll start thinking of ways you can repay me,” Wan said with a gold-toothed smile.

LeFay laughed. “You do that.”

Ada, LeFay, Tomas, and Clarissa waited for Congo to return with a couple other pirates, whose names none of them knew or would remember. With their party assembled, they ventured out across the surface of Europa.

Wan watched them go.

As beautiful as the terraformed moon of Jupiter was, with towering mountains in the distance, with massive lakes and rivers, with no forests but the starting of many, and the huge planet hanging above them in the sky, it also bore the scars of war. The small group navigated their way around craters from fallen bombs that littered the landscape. Pieces of ships,

skeletons still in their armor, and spent shells were everywhere. For every picturesque sight was a horrific one, Wan figured, showing just how good human beings were at killing each other. They finally disappeared over the horizon, headed for the large UEF base that LeFay's HUD maps had located even as they were crashing. Wan doubted they'd find a welcoming party when they got there, but Ada and Tomas seemed to think they could figure something out. *Good luck, he thought. One disaster at a time.*

Wan returned to *Orion's* bridge. He plopped himself down on his captain's chair after paying a visit to Tonga, who thankfully was awake and okay, relatively speaking. Soon as his rear hit the cushions of the seat, he sighed and relaxed. He looked out the bridge viewing window at the vast expanse of green and black that was Europa. "So what's the good word, Falcon?"

"Afraid I don't have any. Navigation, weapons system, and shields are out of order. There's a massive hole where engineering used to be, and one of our main engines is shot."

For Falcon to get out of his seat was a whole process. And with his jacked-in access to the ship's diagnostic computer, rudimentary though it was, he was in a better position to oversee the repair process than Wan.

"How long until repairs are finished?" Wan took a swig from his bottle of water. His chest ached.

"Couldn't tell you. We got some of the crew working on it, but without Kelso, it's probably gonna take a while."

Wan looked up sharply. "We lost Kelso?"

"Afraid so," Falcon said sadly.

That news was upsetting to Wan, but he felt Falcon's eyes on him, so he tried to mask it. Not only had Kelso been a genius engineer, but Wan had saved him from the streets of Vassar-1 himself. It would be a bit much to say he was like a son to Wan—more like a personal project—but he still cared for him deeply. Or at least, he had.

"We lost him along with engineering. We suffered seven casualties, Captain."

"Shit," Wan said. Then he shrugged. "Well, what can you do, right?"

Falcon frowned, but said nothing.

Wan took another swig of the water and felt it soothe his throat. He should be dead. Hell, some days he felt like he already was. "Make sure to

keep record of who we lost. Once we're off this moon, we'll transfer credits to their families' accounts, if they have any family."

Falcon nodded. "Of course, sir."

It was beyond fair by the standards of his peers, Wan knew, but it was also the least he could do after all this. He glanced at Falcon. "You sure you don't want to, I don't know, unplug?"

"And do what? Go get some fresh air out in an active war zone? Thank you, but no."

Wan nodded. He had a point. "Suit yourself."

Falcon leaned forward, squinting out the viewing window. Wan followed his gaze; then a note popped up in his HUD.

"Shit," Wan said.

"Trouble, too," Falcon said.

Ships were heading straight their way. The scanners were just picking up on them. "Fighters?" Wan asked.

Falcon shook his head. "From the reading, they're small."

"How small?"

"Hoverbikes."

Wan leaned back, then steepled his hands in front of his chin.

"What are you thinking, Cap?" Falcon asked.

"I'm thinking," Wan said hesitatingly, "let's try being diplomatic for once."

Falcon's eyes grew as large as thruster exhausts. "Diplomatic? *You?*"

Wan groaned as he stood back up. "I got this," he said as he headed out of the bridge and continued down the main walkway to exit the *Orion*.

Wan hobbled out until he stood alone in front of the ship. He glanced back and waved up at Falcon, who saluted back.

What the hell are you doing?

Falcon looked nice and safe in the ship. Wan wondered what had possessed him to come down here.

His coat blew in the European winds as he watched a couple of small shapes in the distance get closer and bigger. He nervously opened and closed his fists as he thought about what he was going to say to them.

"Remember," Wan reminded himself out loud. "Diplomatic."

TWELVE

BELOW

“WHERE ARE YOU TAKING ME, Mr. Bausman?” asked Sydal. They’d been walking for almost fifteen minutes, since leaving Janis and Lau behind.

“To the entrance to the tunnels. Like you asked, sir.” Bausman led the detective down a scenic trail.

“I sure hope so. I sure hope you aren’t just delaying me, wasting my time. That’d be a mistake.”

“I assure you I’m not. We’re close. I can’t bring you to the main entrance, because it’s in a private residence at the moment.”

“Why is the entrance to the tunnel in someone’s home?” Sydal asked. A fair question, he thought.

“It’s only a residence right now. Actually belongs to the architect in charge of the project. But once it nears completion, he’s going to move off the moon, and his house will be converted into an entrance, exit, and storehouse,” explained Bausman.

“That’s a strange way of doing things.”

“Look around you, Detective,” he said. “This is a strange place. A garden in the middle of a cold desert.”

“True. How much further?”

Bausman suddenly stopped.

“Why are we stopping?”

Bausman knelt down. He cleared away some plants and revealed a hatch, built right into the ground. “Because we’re here.”

“I’ll be damned,” Sydal said. “Well, open her up.”

Bausman stood up straight and turned around. Immediately, Sydal could tell his demeanor had taken a drastic change. Instead of meek and subservient, he was now confident.

“Afraid I can’t do that, Detective.”

Sydal tensed, his senses heightened. “And why’s that?”

“I can’t let you go down there.”

“Then why the hell did you lead me here?”

“I needed to get you further away from your partner,” Bausman said.

He pointed at Sydal, but there was something wrong with his hand. As Sydal watched, his entire hand and wrist morphed in the blink of an eye into a solid wedge of blackened flesh with a sharp edge.

“What the hell?”

“It’s time, Detective,” he said. “Embrace it. Embrace the Abyss.” With that, Bausman swung at Sydal.

Sydal was still struggling to process what he was seeing, and his mind told him to brace for a punch. Then he felt a stinging, burning sensation, followed by wet warmth. He looked down, and he had a cut across his chest. There was no time to process what had just happened, because Bausman was going in for another attack.

Sydal barely dodged the second swing of what was now clearly a razor-sharp blade where Bausman’s hand been. It was huge, running half the length of what had once been his forearm. It was more than capable of slashing Sydal’s throat, or maybe taking his head off.

Sydal drew his pistol. But before he could aim and fire it, a tendril came flying out of Bausman’s back and hit him hard in the chest, knocking the gun out of his hand and throwing him to the dirt. He scrambled backwards as Fredrich tried to impale him with his blade hand.

“What the shit, Fred!” yelled Sydal as he managed to get back up to his feet. He looked at the formerly squirrely man and saw that his eyes were shiny and black, and his mouth was full of sharp, needlelike teeth.

Bausman answered by rushing the detective. Sydal did the only sensible thing and turned to run for his life. “HUD, call Detective Janis,” he screamed.

There was no answer. Once he was hidden behind a tree, and for the moment a little safer, Sydal tried again. Still no answer.

“I truly am sorry,” Bausman said. “But there’s great works here, Detective. And we cannot allow you to interrupt—” Before he finished his

sentence, he thrust his bladed hand forward, impaling the tree he thought Sydal was hiding behind.

The second Sydal realized that Bausman had picked the wrong tree, he made a run for his gun. As the monster struggled to retract his blade hand, Sydal had already retrieved his firearm. Without delay, he aimed at the once squirrely-looking German man's head and unloaded.

Sydal was relieved at first as he riddled Bausman's head with shots and blood poured out. He thought it was all over. But then he watched as the bullets simply secreted back out of Bausman's head, and the deformed head returned to its original shape.

That...what the hell is he?

Sydal looked on, terrified, as Bausman's other arm burst into a couple dozen sharp spikes. It shredded the tree. As it fell, the thing that used to be Bausman turned to Sydal and let out a bone-chilling shriek.

Nope, that's not happening!

Sydal figured he had two options. He could make a run for it through the artificial wilds of the Aitken Basin, but it was enclosed and covered in cameras and tracking devices he didn't trust. Plus, whatever Bausman had become, he probably knew the community like the back of his shapeshifting hand, considering he was its elected leader.

So he went for option two: the tunnel.

He ran for the hidden entrance, desperately hoping he didn't miss it as he rapidly retraced his steps. When he saw it, he dove to the ground and grabbed the hatch. Bausman lumbered towards him, tendrils wiggling out of his back. His mouth opened so wide his bottom jaw reached his chest. The shrieks made the detective's ears ring.

Sydal frantically tried to spin the hatch. At first it gave him a little trouble. Eventually, with all his might, he managed to turn it and pull it open. Bausman had almost caught up. Just for a little insurance, the detective put two carefully-placed bullets into the monster's kneecaps, causing it to fall and slowing it down just enough that he could climb down into the tunnels.

Sydal turned to close the hatch behind him, hoping to slow the creature still more. As he did so, he felt Bausman from the other side, trying to open it. And he was strong.

Balancing on the rungs of a ladder in the dark, Sydal struggled to hold on to the hatch's wheel. He could feel it: this was a tug of war battle he

would surely lose. That couldn't be allowed.

Luckily for Sydal, he managed to spot what he needed to save his life. There was a lock on the hatch in the form of a lever he needed to pull down. However, that would mean he'd have to use one hand to lock it which meant one less hand to stop Bausman from opening the hatch on the other side.

C'mon, c'mon, c'mon...

There was no choice. Sydal had to sacrifice his position in this potentially fatal tug of war and try to lock the hatch. He quickly grabbed the lever and pulled with all his strength. It barely budged, so he tried leaning down some to add some pull force to the locking lever. Nothing. All that was left was a gamble.

Sydal completely let go of the hatch at the same time as he grabbed the locking lever with both hands and jumped off the ladder. His body weight was just enough to engage the lock. It slid in, then stopped, and Sydal finally lost his grip. He fell down to the tunnel floor.

He landed awkwardly on the slightly wet tunnel floor, but managed not to break anything. He quickly took his pistol back out. With one finger, he turned on the flashlight right below the barrel and aimed it at the hatch as Bausman pounded on it from the other side. He watched as the thick steel deformed with each one of the monster's blows. Then it suddenly stopped. There was another shriek, and then nothing.

Sydal got up from the tunnel floor. His back and the back of his pants were soaked. He didn't care. Obviously there were more pressing matters. What was this tunnel? Where did it lead? And most prevalent in his mind was the question of what he'd find down here, especially considering what he'd just escaped from.

A little out of breath, a little out of shape, Sydal took a moment to gather himself. He used his pistol's flashlight to examine his own chest. The cut Bausman had given him was deep. If he didn't do something about the bleeding, he might bleed out. There was no telling how long those tunnels were, or when he'd be able to get out.

Sydal took off his coat. Holding that between his thighs, he then took off his shirt. He grimaced as the cotton-like material rubbed against his wound. Then he wrapped his shirt around his chest, over his injury, and tied it tight at the sleeves. After putting his coat back on, he started down the tunnels.

“HUD, call Detective Janis,” whispered Sydal as he walked, using his pistol-mounted flashlight to light his way.

“Sorry. Cannot dial Detective Janis,” replied the robotic woman’s voice in his HUD. In the corner of it he saw that there was no signal, which made sense.

“Shit!” Sydal was really hoping for some backup and help. Or, at least, he hoped that his partner and friend wasn’t dead, shredded to pieces like poor Sophie Wright and almost himself. He needed to focus.

We’ll figure out what the hell that thing was once we’re out of here. You gotta get back to your kids. You got to save them from whatever is pretending to be...

That’s when a horrible realization hit Sydal. Maria could be the same kind of abomination that had just tried to kill him. What would that mean for his children’s safety? The question propelled his legs faster through the tunnels.

The tunnels under Aitken Basin were creepy, completely dark other than the light that bled through the occasional sewer grate-like opening. He really needed that gun mounted flashlight. It guided his way, but also made every movement scarier. Sydal fully expected to shine his light from left to right and reveal another monster, waiting there to ambush him. But it was quiet down here, other than the sound of echoing dripping water and the detective’s own footsteps.

Sydal walked for a good hour. There was nothing. Just more tunnel. He wondered just how long it was. If it really reached the Lunar Dome, how long would it take him to walk there?

Two hours passed. Sydal was tired and thirsty. God, he was thirsty. There were no more dripping storm drains that he regretted not standing under with his mouth open when he’d had the chance. He surely must’ve been far from Aitken Basin, and it must’ve been only the moon’s surface above.

Three hours passed. Sydal wanted nothing more than a drink and to rest, but he knew stopping meant he could pass out. Passing out down here meant death, so he kept trudging along.

What’s that?

Sydal heard what sounded like talking, and a vehicle’s engine. At first he thought he was hallucinating. After all, he’d been down here for a while.

Combine that with his injuries, and perhaps his state was deteriorating faster than he expected.

No, it wasn't a hallucination. Sydal could see three distant headlights in a triangular pattern, far down the tunnel. This was his chance. He needed to take out whoever was driving that thing and commandeer their vehicle.

With the flick of his finger, Sydal turned off the flashlight on his pistol. Having held the pistol up as his guide for three hours, his forearm, elbow, wrist, and shoulder ached and shook. He took a deep breath and held it to try and steady his aim.

Right before he was lit up by the oncoming vehicle's lights, Sydal turned his own flashlight on in an attempt to blind them. It worked: the vehicle slowed down. Someone yelled out, asking who was there, and that was when the detective opened fire.

Sydal shot without thinking it through. He was a cop. As law enforcement, it was his job to protect the public. If the people in that vehicle were just clueless workers, then he was a criminal, a murderer.

Please don't let them be innocent. Please don't let them be innocent. Please don't let them be innocent.

As Sydal approached, he saw that both men were completely bald, and wearing the strange garb that the Oblivion cultists had all started to wear. Did that make shooting them okay? Maybe. Did the cult have something to do with whatever the hell Bausman was?

The first thing Sydal did after pushing the bodies off the transport was look for anything that could potentially quench his thirst. Much to his dismay, he found nothing. So he got in, put it in reverse, and sped down the tunnel.

Relieved to be off his feet, Sydal could relax, but only a little bit. Those cultists had to come from somewhere, and he was about to drive there.

The ride was smooth, even though Sydal's mind was everything but. He wiped the sweat off his face as he concentrated on what was within the reach of the transport's headlights. At any moment he expected to see more cultists—or worse, Bausman.

It was bound to happen eventually, but Sydal was still surprised to see the tunnel abruptly end. There, lit up by the headlights, was a pair of heavy-looking iron double doors. He turned off the transport and climbed out.

Sydal used his pistol flashlight to examine the iron double doors. They looked old, almost ancient. The handles were oddly shaped and higher up

than usual. In order to try and open them, he had to reach up and pull downwards.

The doors had designs on them, writing in a language that couldn't be more foreign to the detective. Sydal ran his hand across the etchings, which looked like what he could only describe as aliens. He felt grit on his fingers. It was dust. How old were these doors, and what were they hiding? Or were they containing something?

These weren't built with the tunnels. No, they were here before construction even started. So did they build all this around them? Why?

Sydal's musings were interrupted by the sound of the doors opening from the other side. He had to make a quick decision. Surely whoever came through would notice the transport just sitting there in the tunnel. How would he deal with that?

As the doors slowly creaked open, Sydal hid behind one of them. After taking a deep breath, he readied his pistol. There was no telling how many people were going to come through there, and there was no way to tell if they were armed, trained, or just poor clueless construction workers.

Sydal heard one man's voice: "They're waiting for us. I dunno why they need all these explosives, though."

"It's none of our business," said a second voice. "We serve our Saviors. We serve the Abyss."

So he knew there were at least two of them. *Calm and steady.*

"Yeah, well, it would be nice if the Abyss told us why every now and then—what the hell is that?"

"It's one of our transports, I think. But what's it doing here empty?"

Control your breath, control your aim.

"I dunno. Didn't Miller take one out with, uh, what's his name again?"

"Howell."

"Yeah, didn't he take one out with Howell? Not too long ago?"

Sydal slowly squeezed himself out from behind the iron door. He pointed his pistol straight at the nearest of the two cultists. He didn't fire until they started investigating the blood on the steering wheel.

He pulled the trigger twice in quick succession. Two headshots, two kills. He breathed again as they crumpled.

If he was going to make it out of these tunnels, Sydal needed to find some way to fit in. If this was the end of them, he was willing to bet there were more than a few additional cultists between him and the exit.

After putting on some of the cultists' rags, Sydal stood in front of the open double doors. What he saw was a long dark hallway; but unlike the tunnel, it ended at what looked to be an opening. From the end of the hall he heard noise, like a city.

Sydal stowed away his pistol under his newly acquired rags and walked down the hall. When he reached the end, he found himself in a cavernous room. It was cylindrical. Pipe openings lined the walls. In the middle was a large stack of crates and metal boxes. Two rovers were parked by one of the curved walls, but there was no one in sight.

A beam of light shined down from the ceiling. Sydal looked up. There was a sewer grate. He could hear the sounds of people talking, and rovers driving by. Through the bars, he saw the Lunar Dome high above.

Sydal was relieved that he was close to home, but there was no ladder or stairs leading the way out. No, his journey under the moon wasn't over yet. It was time to finish it. First he wanted to know what was in those crates.

"HUD, access police code de-scrambler. Authorization echo, niner, bravo, four." All police HUDs came equipped with a program to unlock doors, vehicles, and in this case, password-locked crates.

It only took about thirty seconds. The seal of the crate broke, and the top opened up on its own. Sydal didn't know what he was looking at. Inside was a thick clear plastic tube. Contained within in was a swirling black liquid that looked to him like oil, only it moved by itself, seemingly with a mind of its own.

Sydal opened another crate. He found the same living oil as the first. The third crate also had the same substance.

What is this shit? What are they up to down here? And why are they stockpiling it?

Sydal was perplexed. There was no way for him to form a theory as to what the living oil was. Some ideas did pass through his mind, but none made sense. All he knew was that whatever it was, it wasn't good.

Between the cultists, Aitken Basin, Waterman-Lau, Bausman, the tunnels, and now the crates, Sydal put together that a conspiracy was unfolding beneath the moon. The question was, what exactly were they doing, and to what end?

You can figure this out once you're safe.

Sydal was still in danger; he knew that. Even though he was back, so close to home, he still needed to find a way out. Unfortunately there wasn't

a ladder, or steps under an exit sign. He scanned the cavernous cylindrical room, searching for any escape.

There was a wide pipe that looked like it had been converted into a walkway. Angled upwards, Sydal decided it was his best bet to move on and get out, so that's the path he took.

The pipe kept leading upwards. Sydal measured each step, careful to be quiet, but also hasty. The closer he got to the top of the pipe, the more he heard chanting. It was eerie, unnerving, to hear echoing chants that of course sounded ominous. When he reached the top of the pipe, he saw the source.

Cultists filled another cavernous cylindrical room at the end of the pipe. Sydal stood at the entrance, looking at rows and rows of the extremists, standing in a circle around something floating above them in the middle of said room. Upon further inspection, it was a rock.

Is that...is that lava rock? Obsidian?

Sydal stared at the floating black rock that the cultists were clearly praying to. It was about the size of his head, and clearly not suspended by anything. Which his mind told him was impossible, but after the day he'd been having, impossible was getting easier and easier to accept. They chanted in unison, completely not noticing their uninvited guest.

At the far end of the cavernous cylindrical room was a ladder. That ladder led to a slightly-ajar manhole cover. The detective had found his exit.

Sydal psyched himself up. He reassured himself that he could do it. All he had to do was make his way around the outer edge of the cultists and to the ladder. From there he would be home free.

His heart racing, pulse pounding, eyes wide open and breathing controlled, Sydal tiptoed around and over cultists as he pressed his back against the rounded walls of the cylindrical room. Terrified that he'd be noticed or step on someone, he moved deliberately, and placed each footfall carefully.

Sydal didn't breathe easy until his hands were on the ladder, feet on the rungs. It was an old rusty ladder, but he reckoned it would hold his weight. With the finish line in sight, he hurried up, eager to finally be free.

Everything went according to plan until Sydal was about three fourths of the way up the ladder. One of the rungs was rusted out and couldn't support his weight. The piece of iron broke and fell off, hitting one of the cultists on the back of the head.

“...Uh-oh.”

Almost all at once, the cultists who were praying to a rock looked up and saw Sydal. They started yelling at him and quickly climbed up after him. Panicked, he hurried up to the top.

At first Sydal tried to move the manhole cover with his hands and arms, but it was too heavy, so he pushed his upper back against it and pushed upward with his thighs. The cultists were so close they almost grabbed his ankles and pulled him down, but he managed to plant both hands against either side of the sewer opening and push himself up and out.

Though out of the tunnels, Sydal couldn't quite rest yet. He rolled over on the ground of what was an alleyway and pushed the heavy manhole cover back over the opening with his feet. It slammed in place as he leaped to his feet and took off at a dead run, not daring to look behind him until he'd gone a full block. Then he finally looked over his shoulder, expecting to see pursuers.

But he was alone. As he turned a corner and looked back one last time before he lost sight of the manhole, he saw that it still hadn't moved. Either they couldn't or wouldn't follow him.

Sydal ran for another dozen blocks before slowing. He finally breathed a sigh of relief. He'd made it. He'd escaped.

Now it was time to do something about what he'd seen.

THIRTEEN

DESPERATION

“WHAT’S WRONG? Why isn’t this working right?” asked Saito as he stood next to the Pale Man, in the Shapeless’ spherical command ship in Vassar-1’s orbit.

“It’s fine,” reassured the Pale Man.

“Is it? There are too many errors. Too many glitches. He’ll catch on to what you’re trying to do and lock away the information you’re looking for.”

Saito looked at his son, Ben, as he floated just off the floor, tendrils attached to his forehead, lost in the replaying and manipulation of his own memories. “Just like this one did.”

The Pale Man waved his hand above the floor. Out of it emerged a Herald Stone, surrounded by bright glowing blue light. It was small, about the size of a baseball. Little slivers and chips of it broke off and evaporated in the glowing blue energy.

“We need more power. We need another Herald Stone,” said the Pale Man as he walked around the obsidian rock, examining it. “There should have been one here. Why hasn’t it been found?”

“The humans have been out looking, but haven’t found a thing. Some think it was destroyed during our initial attack.” Saito raised a valid point. The Shapeless unleashed such wanton destruction that it was easy to believe that they could’ve accidentally destroyed one reason they’d come to Vassar-1. Combine that with their failure to get the AIC’s planet-killing weapon, and they’d failed on two fronts. The Shapeless weren’t used to failure.

“It wasn’t destroyed.” The Pale Man walked over to one of the room’s fluid walls. He pressed his hand against it and it retracted, revealing a clear view of Vassar-1 below. “It’s down there somewhere. I can feel it.”

“Then why waste time with this boy? Why not dedicate ourselves to finding it?”

The Pale Man looked over at Saito. “This boy and the information he has in his head might be the key to reforming the *Atlas*’ weapon once we have the power. He has his defenses, yes, but he’s not strong. I can feel him falter. And the Herald Stone will come to us. Trust me.”

BEN WAS in his classroom at the UEF Naval Academy. Standing in front of the class was the Pale Man. Dressed in a UEF Naval uniform, the Pale Man looked the part. Behind him was a digital holographic chalkboard. All over it were drawn pictures, diagrams, and writing all pertaining to the AIC.

“Nice of you to finally join us, Mr. Saito,” said the Pale Man. “Now, we can get started. Today’s lesson is about our enemy, the rebels of the AIC and how we can destroy them. Mr. Saito, what can you tell me about planet-killing weapons?”

“I...they’re illegal?”

“Yes, technically they are, but what can you tell us about them other than their legal status? For example, can you describe the effects and where we could find one?”

Ben felt that the question was weird. Why would a naval instructor ask a cadet where planet-killer-class weapons were? Why would he think that he knew? “I don’t—”

“Let’s try something else.” The Pale Man snapped his fingers, and Ben was no longer in a desk in a classroom.

A bouncer grabbed Ben by the collar of his naval dress uniform and literally threw him out of a bar. Shoulder first, the young officer burst through the bar doors and landed on his hands and knees. Immediately, he started throwing up.

“Jesus, these damn soldiers,” said a passerby as he narrowly avoided getting Ben’s vomit on his boots.

Ben heard the comment over the booming music from the bar he’d just been thrown out of. If he was sober, he probably would’ve ignored it, but he was the exact opposite of sober.

“Whaddyaaa saaay?” Ben slurred. He clumsily picked himself up off the Annapolis street. He struggled to stand steady and straight.

“Get out of my face, soldier boy,” the passerby said.

“Or whaaaat?” asked Ben. He stumbled a bit, then pushed the passerby. That resulted in him getting punched in the face. Instead of falling back to the ground, he landed on a thin uncomfortable cot inside the local precinct’s jail.

Ben sat up. His head and jaw throbbed; his mouth was dry. His white UEF dress uniform was stained with his own blood and vomit. He looked down and noticed that the floor wasn’t actually a prison cell’s floor, but the boards of a boardwalk. Through the cracks he could see the ocean underneath.

When he looked up, Ben didn’t see the cold grey walls of a precinct jail. No, he saw a sight he knew well from his memories. He was just a kid the last and only time he’d been at the beach and boardwalk, so all the details weren’t quite right, but they were close enough that he knew what he was looking at.

Ben walked up to the jail cell bars, which were rooted in place by thin air. He looked around and saw himself as a child, holding both his parents’ hands. None of this made any sense.

“What is this? Where am I?” he asked out loud.

“Saito? Saito!” A police officer came walking along towards the cell doors. He stopped and made eye contact with Ben. It was the Pale Man. “You Ben Saito?”

“Yes.”

“You made bail. Get the hell out of here.” The Pale Man opened the cell door.

Ben stepped out of his cell onto the boardwalk. He followed close behind himself and his parents as they strolled along. This memory always stood out to him. It was one of the only times he’d truly felt he was part of a family. It was one of the only times his father had been there mentally and wasn’t obsessing about the next mission.

He was so focused on himself and his parents, Ben didn’t notice the surroundings changing. Gone was the boardwalk, suddenly replaced with the narrow streets and neon lights of the red light district. His parents led the younger version of him into a place called “Candy’s Place.”

Ben followed himself into Candy's Place. It was as dark and seedy as he remembered. There were the same smells: alcohol, sex and shame. What wasn't the same was the clientele.

In the bar area of Candy's Place, draped in low red filtered light, Ben saw Ace getting a lap dance from Francesca. He saw Commander LeFleur on stage, gyrating her hips. He saw the poor bastards from Ada's group of survivors, Reinhardt and the priest, laughing at the bar, tipping back drinks.

Ben saw himself at maybe twenty-two, turn into a room off the bar. He trailed along. There was a short hallway. At the end was an open doorway, which he saw his younger self go into. He followed.

"You're going tomorrow?"

Ben had walked in on an argument he'd had with one of his few serious girlfriends over the course of his still relatively young life. Her name was Gwen, and this was when they'd had a relationship ending argument after he waited to tell her he was shipping out on the *Valiant*, his first deployment as a lieutenant commander.

"And you're just telling me *now*?" Gwen was livid. She was up out of bed, pacing back and forth in his apartment's bedroom.

Ben was still in bed. "I...I couldn't find a good time to tell you."

"So you chose the night before you were going to leave? For a year!"

"Look, can you...? I'm sorry. Can you come back to bed?"

"Screw you, Ben! I'm leaving." Gwen started to put her clothes back on.

"C'mon, don't be like that. It's just a year. I'll be back before you know it." Ben was embarrassed seeing himself like that. After all he'd been through since the attacks on Annapolis, it was like looking at a stranger.

"This is on me," Gwen said as she pulled her shirt over her head and fit her arms through the sleeves. "I'm the idiot that somehow thought I could change you. That's on me."

Ben looked past himself at the windows of his old apartment. Through them, he didn't see the lit-up Annapolis skyline. No, he saw the bunker under the Senate Circle in Vassar-1. From the looks of it, they were preparing for the fight against the Shapeless. But then his attention was pulled back to his breakup with Gwen.

"I'm sorry! What more do you want me to say?" asked younger Ben.

Gwen sat down on the bed next to him. She kissed him on the cheek and held his face gently between her hands. "Nothing. I don't want you to say

anything. Take care of yourself, Ben. Really, I hope you do.”

Ben heard alarms behind him. He turned and saw that he was in the corridors of the UEF *Valiant*. Something urged him to start running towards an open bulkhead at the end of said corridor. A fellow officer, Jake Rollins, stood at that bulkhead, waving his hand and yelling for people to hurry.

Ben looked behind him and saw scared, frantic crew members moving as quickly as they could through zero gravity towards the open bulkhead. Behind them was a growing fire that moved like living waves of water in those conditions. The poor bastards in the back got enveloped by the dancing cloud of burning death.

“Hurry!” yelled Ben as he helped some of the stragglers escape the fire, but he saw that it was getting too close. He needed to leave himself; otherwise it threatened to burn him to death, too. “Dammit!” He retracted his outstretched hand and proceeded to try and save himself.

Ben was the last one to make it to the *Valiant*’s forward section. Rollins closed the bulkhead behind him and locked it. Normally Ben would agree that was the best course of action, but the unpredictable nature of fire in zero gravity changed that perspective.

“Wait.” Ben looked through the window on the bulkhead. He saw that the fire had stopped advancing. There were more crew members on the other side that could be saved. He tried to open the bulkhead, but it was electronically locked—not by Rollins, but by someone on the command bridge. Ben knew it was the captain, his father, who’d locked it. “We need to get this open. There’s still men in there. We can save them!”

“Sorry, sir, but I can’t do that,” replied Rollins.

“Bullshit you can’t! They can still make it!”

“Orders, sir.”

Ben grabbed Rollins by his shirt and raised his fist as if he was going to punch him. Instead he pinned him against a wall and punched the wall.

The Pale Man appeared behind Ben. “I see. You’re a soldier, a hero like your father.”

“A hero? We just let them die. We didn’t even try to save them.”

“But you tried, didn’t you, Ben? You wanted to be the one to spare them from their fate. It’s an interesting trait among your kind.”

“My kind?”

“The question is, are you more heroic than him? Did they trust you more? If so, why?”

“Trust me with what? Who?” Ben walked back over to the bulkhead window. He looked through it to see a row of crew members, calmly standing in a row, on fire, their skin crackling and popping like man-sized strips of bacon.

The Pale Man grabbed Ben by the back of his head and forcefully pushed it towards the bulkhead window. “Let’s find out.”

Instead of Ben’s face crashing into the thick plastic window of the *Valiant*’s bulkhead door, his cupped hands splashed water on it. As that water dripped off, he opened his eyes and looked at himself in the mirror. Dressed in his UEF naval fatigues, and clean-cut, he also looked nervous, and he had good reason to be. Admiral Chevenko had called him in for a private meeting.

“You got this,” Ben told himself. “Nothing is wrong. It’s just a meeting, that’s all.” But he knew being summoned by an admiral was in no way standard procedure, not for someone at his rank. Considering what had happened on the *Valiant*, and that he was going to be assigned to the new, secret Atlas Project, he figured that at the very least, he was going to get a good talking to about obeying orders and leaving personal feelings and emotions at the door.

Ben heard a toilet in one of the stalls behind him flush. Out of one of them stepped the Pale Man, dressed in UEF Navy blues. He smiled and nodded at Ben, then began to wash his hands.

“You seem hesitant to go further. Been staring into the mirror for a while, almost like you’re stalling. Why? What’s waiting for you outside this bathroom? What are you trying to hide from me?” The Pale Man stopped washing his hands and stared at the side of Ben’s head.

Ben didn’t answer. Instead he opened up the bathroom door. On the other side weren’t the hallways of the officer’s quarters at the UEF Annapolis Base. In its place was the stairwell from Sanctuary Station-33. The same stairwell littered with corpses stacked on top of each other, hiding the stairs. Without hesitating or even blinking, he started climbing up them.

When Ben reached the top of the stairwell filled with dead bodies, he was faced with another door. He waved his hand in front of it and stepped out into Annapolis’ raised city streets.

Ben got out on the thirtieth floor, which also happened to be the thirtieth level of Annapolis. It was the level that provided access to the skyway, a

high-speed magnetic rail line that circled the entire city. One of the stops was the Naval Base, where his parents lived.

The heat was punishing. Millions of air conditioned fans across Annapolis did their best to relieve the never-ending summer.

“Call ‘mom’,” Ben ordered his HUD.

“Hello? Ben?” Ben saw his mother, Beverly Saito, appear in the holographic window in front of him. Seeing her again, after so long, it made him feel warm inside. Made him feel strangely safe.

“Hey, mom!” Ben had to shout over the commotion of the streets. He noticed something odd. The people on the usually bustling streets moved in slow motion.

“Where are you? We’ve been waiting for what, two hours? The party started at four.”

Ben was distracted by seeing Ada in the crowd. She made eye contact with him, then disappeared. “I know, I know, I’m sorry. I’m on my way right now.”

“Everything okay?”

“Everything’s good, I just...I lost track of time, but I should be there soon. I’m actually about to hop on the skyway right now. Want me to bring anything?”

“Just you and your darling face, honey. And the location of the UEF’s secret weapon.”

“Okay, wait...what?” he asked.

“Seriously, it would mean a lot to me. And to your father.”

“Oh yeah, I’m sure he’ll be thrilled to see me. Especially now that I’m late.”

“Don’t be stupid, Benny. Stop trying to fight it,” Beverly said.

“I—”

“Hello, friend. Have you ever looked into the abyss?” Vesta appeared in front of Ben. She was covered in blood, face partially decomposed.

“No, can you move? I’m trying to—”

“Have you looked into the abyss? What did you see?”

“Sorry, mom. See you soon. End call.” Ben managed to walk around the dead zealot.

“Have you ever heard of the Oblivion?” Vesta’s persistence ignored Ben’s polite refusal to engage.

“Yeah, a bunch of terrorists and crazies, right? Now, please, leave me alone. I got places to be.”

Vesta followed. She took a small hyper memory drive out of her black, oil-filled mouth and tried to hand it to Ben. “There’s no place to be other than the right side of history, sir. Here, see for yourself.”

“No, thank you.”

“Please. I insist, sir. I insist, Lt. Saito.”

Ben stopped. He turned to Vesta. “How do you know my name?”

“Take it. Please.” Vesta extended her arm, with the hyperdrive in her outstretched hand. Ben saw over her shoulder, high above the gigantic stacked skyscrapers, a large sphere made of what looked like liquid metal.

Two cultists appeared out of nowhere. They were dressed in rags, which had badges pinned to them. Both subdued Vesta and pulled her away.

“Sorry, sir. We’ve had a problem with these cultists here on this level lately,” explained one of the cultists as his partner tried to drag Vesta away.

In the struggle, Vesta dropped the hyperdrive. Ben waited for her to be dragged away and disappear in the crowd before walking over and picking it up. The Pale Man stood right in front of him, looking puzzled.

“When did this happen? What’s on that drive? We’re wasting time. We need to go back. I need to see what happened in that meeting.” The Pale Man grabbed Ben and pulled him hard.

Suddenly Ben was back in the UEF Annapolis Naval Base officer’s quarters’ bathroom again. He checked his uniform. Satisfied, he took a deep breath and went to leave the bathroom when he felt someone tug on his arm. He looked down and saw the same all-black figure from earlier, glowing yellow eyes staring at him.

Without warning, or a transition that made sense, Ben was on a mag train on his way to his parents’ apartment. He instinctively knew he was two stops away from their stop.

Ben saw three people board the crowded train. Something about them felt off. Then all three of the suspicious passengers appeared keen to hide their faces. Two of them, men, wore baseball caps, and scarves up over their noses. The third, a woman, put on a plastic mask of a skull.

“Behold!” yelled the woman in the mask. It got some of the passengers’ attention, but not all. “Behold this great day!”

Ben tried to make his way forward towards the three masked strangers. Squeezing his way through the street was different and easier than doing the

same through a packed train car. He made little to no progress.

“You are all privileged to sacrifice your lives today. You will sacrifice your lives to the abyss! Rejoice!” The woman in the skull mask took out a small baseball-sized metal sphere.

Ben knew it was a scatter grenade. But then it changed, morphing right in front of him, into a black face with glowing yellow eyes.

When it exploded, Ben was transported off the Earth and whizzed through the universe at dizzying, impossible speeds. He went so fast that the stars were little more than streaks of light, like high-speed super-heated bullet trails.

Finally Ben’s trip stopped on a desolate rock, empty except for a grey humanoid-looking bald alien with those same glowing yellow oval-shaped eyes. It turned and motioned for Ben to follow.

The sky above was red, with three visible moons. There was a city that looked to be built directly into the rocks of the mountains surrounding them.

“This isn’t my memory,” said Ben out loud. “This isn’t what happened.”

“This is what will happen,” answered a calm, monotone voice inside Ben’s head. “We were once like you. Prosperous, spread across galaxies. But then they came, *it* came.”

Ben followed the alien up over the top of a rocky hill. When he reached the top, the two of them looked out on a vast rock-covered plain filled with more of the alien’s kind. They were all on their hands and knees in front of a large floating obsidian stone, a Herald Stone.

“It came from the sky, as it did for so many others.”

Ben looked in the grey alien’s eyes. In them he saw the rapid destruction of countless alien species. He saw them at the height of their civilization; then a Herald Stone arrived, and they got consumed by the Shapeless. Time lost all meaning as he witnessed genocides.

“What is it?” Ben snapped out of it and focused again at the Herald Stone on his new friend’s planet. It was much larger than the one Director Engano had found on Vassar-1, or the one on the Shapeless flagship.

“Their strength,” said the monotone voice in Ben’s head. “Their vessel.” In the blink of an eye, he was floating above the crowd of aliens. “Their weakness.”

A living black oily substance began to ooze out of the Herald Stone. It grew and washed over the masses of aliens like a wave. They cried and

screamed as the insidious liquid killed them and created something new in their place. Finally there were shrieks, hundreds of them. Ben looked down at thousands and thousands of Shapeless.

In the blink of an eye, Ben was inches away from the Herald Stone. He reached out for it. The second he touched it, cracks started to light up from inside. It exploded; the blast wave lay out and killed the newly formed Shapeless.

“Their weakness,” repeated the monotone voice in Ben’s head. “Find the stone. Find their weakness.”

EPILOGUE

ADA WAS UNEASY.

For one thing, she still wasn't at full strength. Her ribs burned, and breathing was difficult in the thick, humid air. Her health hadn't been improved by hours of walking across the seemingly endless barren green and black expanse, littered with the husks of burnt-out tanks and APCs like a graveyard of wars past and present.

More recently, it was the room she'd found herself marched to at gunpoint that had her uneasy. That, and the magnetic restraints on her wrists.

"So this doesn't seem to have worked out exactly how we'd hoped," she murmured.

"You think?" Clarissa snapped back.

"It could always be worse," LeFay said.

Congo, who had taken to staying close to Ada, clearly understanding her condition was fragile even if Ada wouldn't admit it, looked bewildered.

"What is this place?"

"This is an incinerator room," Tomas said.

Congo trembled in her restraints. "Are you certain?"

"Well, if the piles of trash and the smell of gas weren't enough to tell you, I promise you that I used to clean these out at Fort Inov on Earth."

"Are you sure it's a UEF base?" Congo asked. "Those didn't look like UEF soldiers that led us here."

"They looked like what I'd expect on this hellhole," Ada said.

They'd been intercepted about an hour ago by a group of soldiers on hoverbikes. Their uniforms had been filthy, and their armor scuffed. It was

clear to Ada that they were UEF forces, even if pieces of their protective spider-weave gear were mismatched and looked like they were stitched together—not just from different units in their own army, but some from the enemy as well.

After a tense display of weapons and intent by the two dozen soldiers, Ada had managed to convince LeFay and Clarissa not to start shooting. Would she and Tomas have reacted the same if they were AIC soldiers? She couldn't say. She only hoped that she hadn't made a terrible mistake.

The soldiers had put them all in restraints and led them through the entrance gate of a shit-colored and pockmarked forward operating base. Despite the fortifications around it, the tattered walls looked like they'd fall to a stiff breeze, let alone a strong offensive force.

Ada had assumed that they'd all be led to a holding cell, where they'd have to explain themselves. That would have been standard UEF treatment. She'd been mentally preparing an explanation when they'd been led right past a large central structure and instead into a smaller building in an altogether different part of the base.

Tomas was right, of course. This was the incinerator room. The walls were charred and blackened, caked with the decay of decades of use.

"It smells like shit," Clarissa said. Her eyes swept over the bags of refuse and metal chunks of debris. "Maybe they should actually fire this thing up from time to time."

"Careful what you wish for," a staticky voice boomed from a pair of speakers someone had half-heartedly hung next to a thick window of reinforced duraglass.

Through the stained and cracked glass, Ada watched as what she assumed was the leader of the hoverbike group that had led them here took off his goggles and pulled down his scarf. He looked unremarkable, except for an eyepatch with gauze underneath it.

Ada heard LeFay audibly gasp next to her.

"I have a few questions," he said. "And then I'll happily take care of the trash." His gaze seemed to settle on LeFay.

"Things just got worse," LeFay said to Clarissa out of the side of her mouth.

"We're in an incinerator," Clarissa hissed. "Surrounded by UEF soldiers." She gave Ada a withering stare with that last point. "How much worse can it get?"

“Hello, Sarah,” the man said.

LeFay cleared her throat awkwardly. “Hey, Darren,” she choked out at last. “You’re looking good.”

A smile slowly crept across the man’s face. A wicked, terrifying smile that seemed to grow and grow.

Ada felt a chill. Things had just gotten much worse.

BOOK 7: ENTER ABYSS

ONE

UNDEAD REBELLION

“DO YOU HAVE ANY IDEA?” asked the Oblivion devotionist to Gregor’s right.

“Idea about what, Wilfson?” Gregor replied.

“You know, what’s next,” Wilfson said. “I mean, I get that we had to cull the population, but what’s next for us? Will the saviors give us the peace of the Abyss?”

Gregor considered his friend. He stood at casual attention, rifle in hand, looking around the desolate ruins of the capital, Vassar-1. His bald head glistened with sweat. Wilfson was the reason that unbelievers saw the Oblivion as a cult of the weak.

Gregor knew better, though. Wilfson might be soft, but the Oblivion was strong.

Gregor’s mom had died two years prior. His father, unable to live without his wife of sixty-plus years, had followed her to the grave soon after. That left Gregor alone with a pile of medical bills, no family, no friends, and no kids. All he had was a job as a pleasure ship docking attendant. Just another of the forgotten in Vassar-1.

All that had changed when he met his first Oblivion truth-speaker.

Now, two years later, Gregor was among the first cultists to make the assault on the city he was born in, grew up in and lost everything in. The city had already fallen. The Battle of Vassar-1, as he’d heard it called, had only resulted in a failed rebellion that had done little more than hasten the arrival of the Saviors’ ship. It wasn’t the blow to morale that their enemies believed it would be.

Gregor was positioned in a square across from ruined docks that had once housed part of the Vassar-1 City Sentinels' fleet. He and his fellow cultists were meant to guard it, to prevent any survivors from breaking in and maybe salvaging a ship or two and trying to escape the planet. They had strict orders that no one left the AIC capital, period.

"Hopefully we get chosen to transition and join them," Gregor said plainly.

"Become a Savior?" Wilfson squeaked. "Oh, man, I'd be lying if that doesn't scare me a bit. But it would be an honor, wouldn't it? Hand-picked by our Saviors to join their ranks."

"Do we deserve it, though?" Gregor asked. "What have we done so far? Sent some civilians to the Abyss? They didn't even fight back."

"Are you saying we're gonna have to earn it?"

"Probably. Right? I mean, you want a promotion, you gotta work hard to earn it. Right?"

Wilfson looked a little disappointed. "I guess so. But how are we supposed to do that? Earn it?"

"I dunno. Maybe we gotta find and kill some survivors."

"That's a good idea! But we can't right now. Can we?"

"Not right now. Right now we stand guard, like Ducar ordered us to."

Wilfson looked down at his feet, then back up at his friend, Gregor. "That guy, I don't like him."

"No one does. He sucks. He's in charge, though, so..."

"Yeah. I wonder what we're supposed to be gu—" Wilfson's attention was torn away by a rumbling sound. Pebbles and dirt on the ground of the square started to vibrate. "What is that?"

Gregor looked out in the direction of the rumbling noises. Shapeless, in the form of UEF fighters, screamed by overhead in that same direction, eager to engage someone. He held his rifle at the ready, transitioning from holding it with one hand to two.

There was the sound of fighting and explosions, just out of view. Gregor's pulse started to race. A fight was coming, but against who? They'd crushed the rebellion, who was left to fight?

"Gregor? What's happening?" asked Wilfson, scared.

"They're coming." Gregor checked his gun to make sure it was armed and ready to rock. The other devotionists were starting to line up at the wall, also sensing the fight to come.

Those same men who lined up, ready to defend, got knocked back on their asses by the force of the exhausts of dozens and dozens of AIC ships that appeared over the horizon and sped over and upwards towards the Shapeless flagship high above, in orbit. Gregor couldn't believe his eyes. There were so many of them. Where were all these ships coming from? Not the city; they'd made a point of destroying every ship they found in Vassar-1.

As Gregor and the others sat there in awe, watching the seemingly never-ending cavalcade of ships speeding up towards their Saviors, accompanying fighters made short work of the Shapeless' lesser versions below. So naturally, more were sent. The Second Battle of Vassar-1 had begun.

WHERE THE HELL AM I?

Ben Saito's eyes opened. He was in a haze, not unlike the one he'd woken up to after his surgeries, but he didn't see a hospital room ceiling above him. He saw an undulating liquid ceiling of hundreds of different colors. It would've been beautiful if it wasn't so alien.

"We have humans incoming," Ben heard his mother say. But it couldn't be her; she was long since dead.

Ben felt something strange on his forehead, a sucking sensation. With one hand he reached up and felt something soft and greasy. It was an unpleasant texture. Then he realized that there was nothing underneath him. He wasn't lying on a bed or table; he was floating in mid-air.

"Impossible!" Ben heard the slimy voice of the Pale Man.

Something about his voice made everything suddenly snap back into place.

The Shapeless! They tried to mine my memories. Is that what they were up t...the weapon! They were trying to find the weapon!

Ben struggled to look around him. His head was locked in place, but his eyes could investigate the edges of his vision.

Where was he? He had no idea. The Shapeless must've kidnapped him to try and pry the location of the UEF's weapon out of him. He knew—and more importantly his father must've known—that it was destroyed along

with the real *Atlas*. Not only would they get the location of something that didn't exist anymore, but the fact that they thought they could meant that his dad had to still be in there somewhere, fighting back, deceiving them.

He didn't tell them.

"They're coming from two sides. Below and above," said the voice of his father.

So he was here, too. Ben wasn't sure what to think of the voice of his mother, but he was beginning to think there was something in his father that could be saved.

"Two sides? How? We cut off all communication, fried their HUDs," said the Pale Man.

"Perhaps you underestimate them," answered Saito. "They found a way to call for help."

"Gah." The Pale Man dismissed his words. "Well, what do we do, Captain? Put some of that training to use." The Pale Man leaned on Saito's military acumen. Ben knew it was one of the main reasons he'd assimilated his father into the fold to begin with.

"We fight. Give me a ship, and I'll lead," said Saito.

"No, I need you here," the Pale Man said sharply. After a pause, wherein Ben was sure the location of his voice changed, he said, "I hate to use the last of it, though."

Ben slowly craned his head up as hard as he could, gritting his teeth and stretching his neck muscles to the point of tearing in order to get a better look around. He saw his mother, Beverly, standing next to the Pale Man. His father was opposite them. A Herald Stone—a small one, no bigger than a baseball—floated, much like himself, right next to the Shapeless leader.

Ben remembered what he'd seen when the Shapeless were in his mind. He remembered the strange glowing yellow-eyed beings that had hijacked their attempts. He remembered what the Herald Stone was. The being had called it their greatest strength and their greatest weakness. They needed it to survive. So that was his objective: get that stone, even if that meant he died in the process.

The burgeoning plans in Ben's head went on pause for a moment as he made eye contact with his father. He froze there, not knowing what to do. Then, to his surprise, his father simply looked away. And that was when Ben knew he had to move.

Suddenly the whole Shapeless flagship shook violently.

“What is that?” Beverly asked, surprised.

“That’s a thousand ships zeroing in on us,” his father said. “It’s kind of hard to miss a large, liquid metal sphere floating in close orbit.”

“Enough,” the Pale Man snapped. “We have to nip this now.”

“It’s the AIC,” Saito said. “They were preparing to attack the UEF anyway. They won’t care that we’re releasing them to the Abyss. They’ll only attack as if we were the Earthlings.”

“Yes,” the Pale Man said sourly, as if he didn’t need to be lectured on the obvious. “But if they plan to take us down, they’re going need tens of thousands more missiles.”

Saito shrugged. “They might have them.”

Satisfied that the Shapeless’ attentions were completely focused on the outside threat, not himself, Ben started making moves. He grabbed the tendrils attached to his head with both hands. While pulling, he tried his best not to think about how inherently creepy and disgusting it was to have something like that attached to his forehead. It took a couple of tugs, but he managed to get it off.

The second Ben got the tendrils off his forehead, he fell to the floor of the command bridge. It was surprisingly cold. All the walls in the room turned clear, giving him a dizzying and somewhat nauseating surround view of the battle that was erupting in space around the spherical ship.

You gotta be kidding me! Look at all of them. They must’ve gotten a message out somehow.

For a moment, Ben stayed on the ground on his hands and knees and took in the scenery outside. He’d never seen so many AIC ships in one place. All of them were blowing their way through faux Shapeless UEF fighters, towards the Shapeless flagship, and they showed no signs of stopping—though he was determined to take it out before they could reach it.

Ben got up off the floor. A Shapeless came rushing at him from behind, shrieking like a wild animal in its death throes. It got Ben’s attention, but unfortunately it also got everyone else’s attention, too.

The Pale Man, Beverly, and Lee all turned in unison.

“Shit,” Ben said when nothing better came to mind.

Step one was not getting cut up into little pieces. Ben dodged a couple of swipes from the Shapeless as it rushed at him. One almost cut his neck open like a Pez dispenser, but he narrowly dodged it. Confident that he had

just enough distance between them, he then made a run for the Herald Stone.

Beverly moved in front of the Herald Stone, blocking it. She let out a shriek as tendrils came flying out of her mouth and tried to ensnare Ben.

But her tendrils were grabbed in mid-flight by Lee.

Beverly startled back in surprise and then went stumbling forward as Lee yanked on them, clearing a path.

Ben jumped and rolled past Beverly, and ripped the Herald Stone out of the stasis field it was suspended in.

Immediately upon touching it, Ben felt a sudden rush of energy. He also knew exactly what to do, as if the stone itself spoke to him. In fact, he was so confident all of a sudden that he didn't even blink when he saw the Pale Man sprinting straight towards him.

"Give that back!" snarled the normally calm Pale Man. He reached out for Ben, each finger elongated with a black talon at the end.

Ben stretched out his hand with the Herald Stone in it. He touched it to the tip of one of the Pale Man's talons. Glowing cracks started to appear all over the Shapeless leader's body, just like the ones Ben had seen in the Herald Stone during his vision just minutes earlier. His oily black obsidian eyes opened wide, and then his body disintegrated into hundreds of glowing, burning embers.

There was no time to celebrate the apparent death of the Pale Man. Ben still had to save his father, then find a way off the Shapeless' flagship.

Lee still held Beverly by the tendrils. She'd stood back up and now looked at Lee, confused, like she didn't want to believe that she was being betrayed. Lee, too, looked confused, as if he was just as baffled about what had just happened.

Ben took advantage of whatever was happening to his father and the alien crisis of confidence inside him by rushing at him, Herald Stone in hand. He had no way of knowing that if he hit Lee with it, it would free him from the Shapeless' influence, or if it would disintegrate him like the Pale Man.

All Ben knew was that at this point, he'd accept either outcome. It would tell him the truth either way. Anything was better than...

Something slammed into Ben from behind, and it was only then that he realized he'd forgotten the Shapeless behind him.

Luckily, Ben didn't feel the bladed tendril puncture the back of his calf, because it was his artificial, mechanical one. He did, however, feel himself get pulled off his feet. He was slammed face-first on the same ground he'd just picked himself up from moments ago.

Ben managed to turn his body around as he was being reeled in towards the Shapeless monster, who'd turned the majority of its body into a gigantic mouth full of rows of razor-sharp teeth. It was terrifying, but Ben had a nuclear weapon as far as the aliens were concerned.

Knowing the devastating effects, Ben touched the Herald Stone to the tendril through his leg. It worked just as he hoped. The Shapeless-turned-monstrous-mouth developed glowing cracks beneath its skin and disintegrated, all in a matter of a few seconds.

The Shapeless flagship took several more devastating hits. It was able to self-repair, but it was becoming clear that it wasn't going to hold on forever, restorative properties aside. And without the Pale Man, Ben wondered if anything else would be able to move the sphere.

Ben watched as a pair of shapeshifter dreadnoughts sacrificed themselves to cut off the heart of the AIC attack on the sphere. They were both, in turn, ripped to shreds by concentrated AIC missile attacks that poured out of the oncoming wave of ships.

Ben got up and made his way towards his father, who fought Beverly. It wasn't much of a fight, as he was easily able to grab her and throw her through the wall, out into outer space. The extreme cold did her in almost instantly. Now it was just Lee and his son on the command bridge of the Shapeless flagship.

His father's head snapped around to look at the far wall, his eyes unfocused, almost like he was looking through it. "Hang on," he said calmly.

"What?"

"That's a special payload," he said. His voice was distant, and Ben wasn't sure if he was talking to him or something else.

Ben finally saw the massive missile his father was somehow seeing, just as it erupted in a ball of light and energy that seemed to wash over the semi-transparent walls around them. Heat poured in as if they were now standing in the middle of a furnace.

The whole living vessel began to freak out.

The perfect spherical shape of the Shapeless flagship became contorted. Spikes and spirals flew out of it as it tried to deal with the new foreign weapon. But it couldn't compensate, and the ship died. Now at the mercy of its orbit around Vassar-1, it was helpless.

Scared of death for probably the first time in their existence, and completely without direction from the Pale Man, the Shapeless on board the flagship panicked and jumped off—only to meet their demise in the vacuum of space, Ben noticed. It was as he'd theorized long ago: they worked in a hive-mind mentality, in which they needed a leader to guide them.

Lee was also affected by the loss of the Herald Stone and the Pale Man. He stumbled around and fell to the floor. Ben ran over to see to him. Yes, he needed to find a way off the dying ship, but he wasn't going to leave without his dad. All of this, all that he did was originally just to save him, so he wasn't about to give up now.

"Dad?" Ben knelt down next to Lee, whose body convulsed. He didn't get an answer.

An AIC ship slowly pulled up to one of the transparent walls of the Shapeless flagship's command bridge. Ben barely noticed as a port on the ship slid open and a small army of Marines in combat suits instantly began cutting away at the side of the ship. They shoved some flexible material against it just as the wall fell away.

But he did notice the face in the central shaft who stepped across, rifle in hand, with a trio of Marines around her.

"Director Engano?" he gasped. "How?"

"I expected to see a familiar face," Engano said. "Just not yours." She nodded past Ben at his father. "What's his condition?"

Ben turned around to see that his father was on the ground moaning.

"Shit," she said, coming up short. "What the hell is *your* condition?"

Ben shook his head. "I'm fine," he said. The places where the Shapeless had slashed him were bleeding, but nothing felt too deep. And his father was his big concern now.

"We'll figure it onboard," Engano said. She snapped her fingers, and the Marines stormed past Ben and headed for his father.

"No," Ben shouted. "Let me."

The Marines stopped and glanced back at Engano. She nodded and they stepped back.

Ben knelt down over his father. He took a deep breath and pressed the Herald Stone against Lee's stomach, where the black tendrils originated from. For a moment his body seized up, and Ben feared he might've killed him. But then the black oil-like substance dripped off his body, revealing a problem that Ben hadn't anticipated. There were still open wounds underneath that Lee had suffered back on Sanctuary Station. Somehow the alien infestation had simply suspended the injuries, as if time had frozen, and now they were all coming unstuck at once.

Using his own upper body strength and that borrowed from his artificial arm, Ben picked the unconscious Lee up. The Marines took a cue and joined in helping to carry Lee to the makeshift loading ramp of Engano's ship, and then carried him inside while Ben stopped at the edge.

Ben felt Engano studying his face, but she wisely chose not to speak in that moment. Ben felt a cascade of emotions wash over him.

He'd come here to find his father. To save his father. He'd never expected he could do it.

But he had.

He nodded and stepped down into the ship, with Engano bringing up the rear. She said something to the Marines at the barrier and, a few moments later, Ben sat down numbly on a jumpseat that one of the Marines guided him to.

As the ship pulled away, Ben watched the Shapeless flagship literally fall apart and turn into a big blob of black oil, aimless in the zero gravity around Vassar-1's orbit.

The AIC capital had been freed from alien control. But the victory felt bitter, and none of the Marines around him seemed to draw much cheer from the scene as it played out.

They all knew the fight was far from over.

TWO

THE ADMIRAL

STAMINA HAD NEVER BEEN an issue for LeFay. At least, not for a very long time. Not since before her...well, she considered it a mishap, but really, it was her near death. In fact she had died, for exactly one minute. But for those in the group that weren't running on battery power, fatigue was becoming an issue.

Though not a planet, Europa was big. Once upon a time it had been covered with ice, but that was long ago, before the reclamation projects had made it fertile. Trekking across it on foot wasn't a small undertaking. It was even harder when the entire group was walking blind. Add to that the fact that the only one who knew the way had barely just escaped her own death. Lest they wanted to add their blood to the already-soaked black soil of Jupiter's moon, the group had to work together.

Working together shouldn't have been hard. With LeFay was Ada, who was still in recovery from grave wounds. There was also Clarissa, who might or might not be mentally compromised. And Tomas, who wasn't one hundred percent, but he was still the best fighter of the lot of them. All four of them were used to operating as a team at this point. The only wild cards came from the pirate crew.

LeFay didn't know Doc Congo very well. She knew her reputation, of course, especially among biohackers. The young doctor wasn't just a healer of bodies, but she knew how to augment them, too. That made her invaluable to LeFay. In case something went wrong and she got hurt, the doc could service her wounds better than most. That was assuming her reputation was justified, of course.

“Poor oblivious cannon fodder,” commented LeFay as she stared at the backs of the heads of the two random pirates whose names she hadn’t bothered learning.

“What’s that?” one said, turning around.

“Nothing. Keep going; it shouldn’t be far,” LeFay said.

The pirate gave her a long, dirty look before he turned back around. LeFay looked back, innocent as an angel. The pirates had to know they were bullet sponges if something went down. Then she caught Clarissa’s glance and rolled her eyes.

“Stop being terrible,” Clarissa said. She walked alongside LeFay. Ada, Tomas, and Doc Congo brought up the rear.

“What? It’s true.”

“They’re still people.”

“They’re criminals.”

“So are we,” Clarissa said.

LeFay offered a sardonic smile. “We’re criminals on a mission for good. Surely that makes us better.”

“You tell yourself that, LeFay,” Clarissa said.

LeFay ignored her. She was busy monitoring her HUD. Specifically, she monitored the radar. Surely they would be spotted soon, if they hadn’t been already. It was only a matter of when they were apprehended.

And then she saw the blip on the radar.

“How much further, Ada?” asked Tomas. He was hanging back close to his UEF friend, LeFay noticed. She liked the two of them, but she hadn’t forgotten where they all came from. She didn’t have much use for the squabbles of the AIC and the UEF, but she didn’t know if that extended to everyone in the group. She was sure that Clarissa harbored plenty of ill will toward the UEF.

“If I’m right,” Ada answered through labored breaths, “and that’s a big ‘if,’ then there should be a scout outpost about a mile or two away. They have them peppered all over this part of the moon.”

“UEF or AIC?” asked Doc Congo, who was behind Ada, serving the same capacity as Tomas.

“UEF. But who knows, things change on this damn moon almost every day.”

LeFay noted the labored breathing. Ada was trying her best to sound like she was okay, but she clearly wasn’t. Her voice cracked a couple of

times in those sentences alone.

Ada, Doc, and Tomas were quiet for a moment. Then Congo spoke up again, breaking the silence. “Guess it doesn’t matter much which one, right? I mean, we’re just gonna be pirates to both sides.”

“Speak for yourself,” said Tomas.

“Hate to break it to you, soldier boy,” LeFay said, “but you’re not going to be embraced with open arms. None of us will.”

“I never went AWOL,” Tomas stubbornly said. “Neither did she. I just haven’t been able to...”

“Starting to see it, huh? It doesn’t matter why you’re here. You’re not supposed to be here. You broke the rules. That’s all both sides see. Surprised it took you so long to see it.”

“Relax, Tomas,” Ada said. She chuckled, or at least she tried to. Mostly she just winced. “We’ll have a chance to explain all of this.”

“Oh?” LeFay raised an eyebrow. Ada was being optimistic, but in her state, maybe a little optimism was what she needed.

“Absolutely,” Ada said, smiling. “I’m sure we can explain to them about the shapeshifting alien monsters after they court-martial our asses and throw away the keys,” she huffed.

LeFay snorted.

But Ada’s own laugh had morphed into coughing that wasn’t stopping. Congo came up beside her and started to massage her back. Tomas put an arm around her shoulder.

LeFay stopped walking while they did so.

“What are we stopping for?” Ada said, her voice still scratchy. “Don’t slow down for me. We need to—”

“We got incoming,” LeFay said. “Saw them a minute ago.”

“A minute ago?” Tomas asked, irritated. “Why didn’t you say anything?”

She shrugged. “Hoped they’d pass. Guess they didn’t.”

Clarissa walked up next to her, scanning the horizon. “Probably the welcoming committee.”

LeFay opened her arm and checked on her little friend, Pete.

“That’s not good,” Ada gasped out. Congo hit her in the arm with an injection of something.

“Depends on how you look at it, I guess,” LeFay said. “Lay down your weapons.”

“What?” The pirate that had first turned back to LeFay did so again. “Are you crazy, freak?”

“We don’t want to appear hostile,” LeFay said. She lowered her voice. “But you call me a freak again and I’ll show you what hostile is.”

The pirate gave her another sour look, but after trading a look with his buddy, he lowered his rifle.

LeFay, of course, knew that she had a pistol, a pistol-sized grenade launcher, and a very dangerous drone stowed away inside her augmented body. But it wasn’t her fault that everyone else was woefully unprepared for trouble.

Clarissa frowned, but put her rifle down. The others did the same.

AS THE GROUP of four hoverbikes appeared on the horizon, Clarissa felt her fingernails biting into her palms as she balled up her fists. She wanted badly to have a weapon in her hand. She knew LeFay was bristling with them, so it was easy for her.

But Clarissa knew she could do damage without one. She felt the knife strapped to her ankle. In a pinch, it would do fine.

Clarissa watched the trail of black dust that followed the approaching hoverbikes, and hoped they weren’t looking for trouble. She’d happily dive for her weapon, but there was just nothing to be done if these guys wanted to start shooting.

The first thing that stood out as the four reached the group and started doing circles around them was how beat-up the soldiers riding them looked. According to their uniforms, they were UEF, but barely recognizable.

“These bastards have been embedded for a while,” Tomas murmured.

Their uniforms were filthy, their armor scuffed. Pieces of their protective spider-weave Kevlar were mismatched, looking like they were stitched together, not only from different units in their own army but some from the enemy as well.

“Don’t trust ‘em,” Clarissa’s husband said from beside her. She’d been seeing him much less lately, but she had a feeling that was about to change.

“Agreed,” Clarissa said. She noticed Tomas glance at her, but the others were too focused on the bike riders.

They all had goggles on, ratty scarves over their noses and mouths. So insistent they were on their current actions, the soldiers kicked up a huge cloud of black dust all around them.

“Uh-oh,” LeFay said.

“‘Uh-oh’?” Congo said. “Is that all you have to say?”

“That’s never good coming from her,” Clarissa said.

“What is it?” asked Tomas as his gaze tried to nervously follow the soldiers.

“I think I know them,” LeFay said.

“And that’s bad?”

“It’s not good.” LeFay put her hands up. The rest of the group followed suit, except for Congo and Ada. Ada was too weak, and the doc had to dedicate one arm to holding her up.

The hoverbikes suddenly stopped circling. What Clarissa assumed was the leader slowly floated by them and threw down four pairs of magnetic restraints.

He said nothing. Clarissa looked around at the others. The command was pretty clear.

“This is bullshit,” Tomas said.

“What were you expecting?” Clarissa asked.

The other soldiers began to circle lower on their bikes and made a show of pointing their guns, menacing. They were doing all the talking that needed to be done.

A few minutes later and they were all on the backs of the ramshackle soldiers’ hoverbikes, hands bound in magnetic restraints. Each was on a different bike, except for Ada and Congo, who were together in a support buggy on one of the bikes.

Not one word was said from the time the soldiers stopped circling the group to the time they reached the UEF scout base nearby, but there were plenty of sights to fight the awkward silence. Clarissa noticed Ada, in particular, taking an interest in her surroundings and suspected that the Marine wasn’t as bad off as she wanted the soldiers to think.

At least, she hoped not.

ADA WAS UNEASY.

For one thing, she still wasn't at full strength. Her ribs burned, and breathing was difficult in the thick, humid air. Her health hadn't been improved by hours of walking across the seemingly endless barren green and black expanse.

At least now she had the hoverbike to do the work. But watching the ground, littered with the husks of burnt-out tanks and APCs, zoom past didn't help her mood. It was like a graveyard of wars past and present.

Next, Ada's captor flew through an actual graveyard. There were rows and rows of rifles, butts in the air, barrels buried in the black soil with helmets and dog tags hanging off them. Each was a soldier who'd died defending that accursed moon. Each was someone's loved one lost. Each represented the destruction of a world all their own. Going by the sheer amount of graves, she could tell that wherever they were wasn't a safe place.

Ada's captor flew towards a medium-sized building surrounded by a system of three low walls, lined with soldiers who looked to be in just as rough shape as those on the bikes. Despite the fortifications around it, the tattered walls looked like they'd fall to a stiff breeze, let alone a strong offensive force.

Soldiers watched silently as their comrades brought in the strangers from the wastes. The hoverbikes docked inside the walls. The leader instructed everyone to get off, but they weren't patient about it.

Congo was taking her time with Ada—more than Ada probably needed, but she wasn't above playing up an injury to her advantage. One of the soldiers lost patience and grabbed them by their magnetic restraints and pulled them off.

"Easy there, tough guy," LeFay said darkly.

She got a rifle butt to her jaw for her troubles. That did little but make her smile and lick her split lip.

"She's injured," Tomas said. "That's all she's saying. Go easy."

"Shut up, pirate!" One of the hoverbike soldiers punched Tomas in the stomach, causing him to bend over.

"Come. This way," ordered the leader of the hoverbike soldiers.

Ada had assumed that they'd all be led to a holding cell, where they'd have to explain themselves. That would have been standard UEF treatment. She'd been mentally preparing an explanation when they'd been led right

past a large central structure and instead into a smaller building in an altogether different part of the base.

It didn't take long to figure out what it was.

"So this doesn't seem to have worked out exactly how we'd hoped," she murmured.

"You think?" Clarissa snapped back.

"It could always be worse," LeFay said.

Congo looked bewildered. "What is this place?"

"This is an incinerator room," Tomas said.

Congo trembled in her restraints. "Are you certain?"

"Well, if the piles of trash and the smell of gas weren't enough to tell you, I promise you that I used to clean these out at Fort Inov on Earth."

"Are you sure it's a UEF base?" Congo asked. "Those didn't look like UEF soldiers that led us here."

"They looked like what I'd expect on this hellhole," Ada said.

The walls were charred and blackened, caked with the decay of decades of use.

"It smells like shit," Clarissa said. Her eyes swept over the bags of refuse and chunks of metal debris. "Maybe they should actually fire this thing up from time to time."

"Careful what you wish for," a staticky voice boomed from a pair of speakers someone had half-heartedly hung next to a thick window of reinforced duraglass.

Through the stained and cracked glass, Ada watched as what she assumed was the leader of the hoverbike group that had led them here took off his goggles and pulled down his scarf. He looked unremarkable, except for an eyepatch with gauze underneath it.

Ada heard LeFay audibly gasp next to her.

"I have a few questions," he said. "And then I'll happily take care of the trash." His gaze seemed to settle on LeFay.

"Things just got worse," LeFay said to Clarissa out of the side of her mouth.

"We're in an incinerator," Clarissa hissed. "Surrounded by UEF soldiers." She gave Ada a withering stare with that last point. "How much worse can it get?"

"Hello, Sarah," the man said.

LeFay cleared her throat awkwardly. “Hey, Darren,” she choked out at last. “You’re looking good.”

A smile slowly crept across the man’s face. A wicked, terrifying smile that seemed to grow and grow.

Ada felt a chill. Things had just gotten much worse.

LEFAY STEPPED up to the glass. “Is this really necessary, Darren?”

“You know this guy?” asked Clarissa. Her question wasn’t answered, at least not directly.

“I don’t know, Sarah. Was leaving me and my men to burn to death in that damn ship necessary?” Darren asked.

“Sarah?” Ada was confused.

“I had no choice,” LeFay said, knowing just how hollow her words sounded. “Mission first and all that, right? No reason to take it personally.”

LeFay tried to turn on the charm, but she knew from experience that she came across as more irritating than anything else. It was her special skill.

“We were engaged!”

“Don’t be dramatic, Darren,” LeFay said.

“Un-freaking-believable,” Clarissa said, shaking her head in disbelief.

“What, like you didn’t have a husband and two kids in your undercover op?” LeFay snapped.

“You weren’t undercover,” Clarissa said. “That was never your job.”

“You’re not the only one that had to do things for the Director that you aren’t proud of.”

“Can we maybe focus here?” Ada asked. “I’d like to not get incinerated by your angry ex.”

LeFay gave Clarissa one last withering stare before she turned back to the duraglass window. Darren looked good. He looked older and rougher, but so did LeFay. “Let my friends go, Darren,” she said. “And then we can discuss our...differences.”

“Or how about this,” Darren said. “This time, you have to save your friends from burning to death. By being honest! I know that’s something you and your kind have some trouble with, which really sucks for your comrades here.”

“Seems like he does know you pretty well,” Tomas opined. “And he is exactly...” Tomas left it hanging, waiting for LeFay to fill in the blanks.

“This is the most stubborn person I’ve ever met.”

“You fit that bill yourself,” Ada said.

“This is Lieutenant Darren Werner,” LeFay said, loud and clear so Darren would hear her. “Corporal, this is—”

“*Captain*,” Werner corrected her.

“Nice to meet you,” Ada said in a weak voice. She was fading. The stim shot was starting to wear off, LeFay assumed, and the strain was starting to take its toll.

“Your friends here. Who are they, Sarah? Spies like you? And how’d you manage to slip through the blockade?” Werner’s nose was an inch or two from the glass as he looked over LeFay’s motley crew.

“No, only me and...” LeFay looked around, found Clarissa, and put her arm around her while pulling her in close. “Claire here are spies.” She pointed at Ada and Tomas. “That blonde bombshell and her spicy Latino friend are actually two of yours, UEF military. And lastly, the doctor there, well, she’s a pirate.”

Congo hissed at LeFay, but she just shrugged. “Hey, he’ll like you more than Claire and me.”

“Can you let go of me?” Clarissa said in annoyance as LeFay ended the insincere hug.

Werner took a moment to process the new information. His eyes shifted their focus to Ada. “You’re UEF? What are you doing in the company of pirates and spies?”

“It’s a long story, sir. We were on the *Atlas*,” Tomas answered for Ada, since she was half unconscious at that point.

“THE *ATLAS*!” Werner didn’t expect that answer. “You’re shitting me.”

“No, sir. I can give you my authorization codes, you can check it out yourself,” offered Tomas.

“What’s wrong with her?” Werner pressed his finger against the glass, pointed at Ada.

“She’s in rough shape, sir. She needs medical attention.” Tomas meant it. He was worried about Ada. She was the toughest Marine he’d ever trusted his life to, but she was in a world of hurt. And he wasn’t going to be able to live with himself if he didn’t do everything he could to save her.

Werner stroked the edge of his eyepatch. “If you have authorization codes, she’ll get it.” He motioned to someone beyond their view. “Open it up, Robinson,” he ordered.

“Are you sure that’s a good idea, sir?” asked one of Werner’s subordinates, who must have been the aforementioned Robinson.

“That was an order, Private. We need all the help we can get to deal with what’s coming. Open it!” Werner stood back.

The doors to the incinerator slid open.

“Thank you, Darren. I knew you would see reason—”

LeFay was about to step out first, but she was met with Werner’s pistol pointed at her gut.

“Not you, or your spy and pirate friends. Just them.”

“That’s cold,” LeFay said.

Tomas couldn’t help but notice the way she stepped back like she’d been expecting it. *She knows*, he thought. *She knows he’s not going to help her*. Tomas thought about how to keep her alive if it came to that. He couldn’t sit back and watch LeFay die here, anymore than Ada. They’d both saved his neck.

“Yeah, something like that. Does she need help? Robinson, Kiermeyer. Help her up and to the med bay.” Werner instructed his men to help Ada. Then he addressed Tomas. “You. I never got your name.”

“Sergeant Tomas Ruis. Special Forces Weapons Sergeant Tomas Ruis, sir.”

“An operator? Good. We can really use your help here.”

“You need my code, sir? If you check it, you’ll—”

Werner snorted. “We can’t check shit right now. I was just busting your balls. I know the real thing when it’s in front of me.”

“Sir?”

“Most of my men, they’re new, raw. Softer than baby shit. My original detachment...well, you probably passed them on your way here, they’re dead. So Earth sent me these kids, and I need some help getting them organized for what’s to come. Can you help me with that or not, Sergeant?”

Tomas was a bit stunned. He'd thought that Werner was a man he could trust, but he hadn't expected to get so much immediate trust in return. It made him suspicious.

"Of course, sir. But may I ask that the pirate go with her? She's a doctor, and has been looking over her. She can tell your doctors what's been going on, and—"

"The pirate?" Werner looked at Congo. "She doesn't look terribly dangerous. That works. You, go with her. Help our medics fix your friend."

Tomas was reassured that Werner was a reasonable man. But no sooner was Congo clear than the doors slammed shut.

"Seriously!?" LeFay smacked the window in frustration.

Tomas looked back and saw Clarissa standing behind LeFay, arms crossed, her visage standing out clearly from the blackened walls of the incinerator beyond.

Tomas wanted to stay, but Werner was clearly testing him, expecting him to follow Ada and Congo.

"They saved our lives," Tomas said to Werner.

Werner again rubbed his eyepatch. He nodded. "Good to know, Sergeant. Now take a trip to medical. We need you to get checked out, too."

Tomas hesitated, but something about Werner's demeanor told him that he could trust him. Reluctantly, he walked away.

Behind him, he heard Werner turn back to the window. "Now, Sarah, let's talk about why you're here. And remember, you lie and you fry."

THREE

COLLAPSE

DETECTIVE SYDAL CRAWLED out of an open sewer grate onto the streets of the Lunar Dome. That he was thankful to still be alive was an understatement. He'd never been so scared and so happy in his whole life.

The questions started flooding the detective's inquisitive, curious mind. *What the hell just happened? What was Bausman? Is Detective Janis okay? Was he in on it? How many people are in on it? What is it? How many soldiers are working with the cult? What the hell were in those crates? And what was that rock they were all praying to?*

But one question above all else overrode the others: *Are the kids okay?*

Sydal had to get home. Before he did anything else, he had to be certain that his children were safe, especially after his confrontation with the Shapeless version of Bausman back at Aitken Basin. He harbored suspicions about his wife, Maria; that she wasn't...her. If he was right about that, and it wasn't his imagination, wasn't his cancer...

That horrible thought crept back into the detective's head. What if this was all in his head? His doctor had told him that if it got worse, it could cause hallucinations. No, it was real. He was resolute. Just to confirm his own sanity, he touched his chest, where that monster pretending to be Bausman had taken a swipe at him. To his relief, it stung like hell to the touch.

Sydal picked himself up out of the alleyway. First things first, he needed to drink something, anything. He was so thirsty the puddles on the concrete, with pieces of trash debris and cigarette butts floating in them, looked enticing.

As Sydal got closer to the actual street, things sounded...off. It may have just been from the blood loss and the dehydration, but it was late evening under the Lunar Dome on a Friday. The streets should've been packed; the sound of rover horns, talking, arguing and laughing was usually so prevalent the weekend night soundtrack should've reached the alleyway. Instead of revelry and activity, the detective heard almost nothing. When he stepped out he realized why.

UEF soldiers marched down the streets of the Lunar Dome. It was an odd, unsettling sight. Not only because of what Sydal had seen in the tunnels, but as a supposedly freedom-loving UEF citizen. Sure, there was the odd group of soldiers on the moon; it was the main docking and building base for the Navy. But they'd never been here in such numbers before, in formation, all business.

Sydal looked in one direction and saw what looked to be a line of lunar citizens, maybe two hundred deep, waiting at a bus stop. Street vendors closed up their shops early, while armed soldiers supervised. Tanks corralled rover traffic towards the nearest exit.

"Hey! You! Citizen! Stop right there!" In his daze, Sydal didn't hear the orders from one of the soldiers at first. It wasn't until an angry-looking young soldier stepped in front of him that he got the message.

"What are you doing? It's past curfew. You need to go home." The soldier in front of Sydal took an over-exaggerated sniff. "That is, if you have one. If not, you have to report to the Lunar Civil Center immediately for temporary housing assignment."

Sydal realized he was a bit ripe, but he had good reason. Not in the mood to argue with a soldier and possibly get beaten up, he accessed his HUD and turned on his holographic detective's badge. Immediately the soldiers calmed down quite a bit.

"We're sorry, Detective, we had no idea. But I'm afraid you're still going to have to get off the streets and return to either your precinct or your station. Only uniforms are allowed out after eight." The young soldier in front of him was still intimidated by a cop, which Sydal found funny, especially since that same kid was probably gonna be shipped out to fight to the death with strangers hell-bent on killing him. *And he can't handle talking to a police officer yet.*

Sydal had a lot of questions, but one took precedent here. "Either of you have anything to drink, like water or juice, soda, anything?"

“Yeah. Here.” The young soldier gave Sydal his water bottle from his back. It was warm, and who knew how long it had been in there. The taste of plastic had bled through into it. Still, it was the best water the detective had ever had in his life.

“Now.” Sydal wiped the water from his mouth. “What the hell is going on? Since when was there a curfew?”

“Since today. It was just enacted, orders straight from Earth to deal with all the murders and disappearances that have been happening up here. Martial law.”

“Martial...that’s ridiculous.” Sydal couldn’t help but think there was something else, something more insidious behind this nonsense. Sure, the murder rate had skyrocketed lately, and God knew they had their fair share of problems controlling the large number of homeless and jobless on the moon. The chief had put in for some additional help. But installing the military as the new authority here, and a curfew? It seemed like a bit much.

“Those are orders, sir.”

“Maybe if you guys did your job, we wouldn’t have to be here.” The first soldier that had spoken to Sydal just had to add his little snide remark.

“Shit, man!” objected the young soldier who stood in front of Sydal.

“What? It’s true. They couldn’t keep these animals under control, so we had to be called in. I hate the moon.”

“Sorry, he’s a dick.”

“No worries,” responded Sydal. He was happy that he got the water. He wasn’t about to get into a tiff with some young jerk-off soldier. “Where’s the line for the dark side?”

The young soldier pointed to the right, to the east. “I think the line starts over there somewhere, down near the docks.”

Sydal nodded, and then he started going east. He kept his holographic badge out to avoid having to talk to anyone else. All he wanted now was to get on a thruster bus to the dark side, walk through his front door, grab his kids, and have them all sleep on the couch together for a few days. Hopefully the whole military-rule thing would blow over. Then it crawled back into his mind.

Maria...

Sydal thought about his wife as he limped his way through the eerie, empty Lunar Dome streets. What if she was in on whatever conspiracy that was unfolding on the moon? She was military, after all, and he knew

without a doubt that at least some of them were in on it. Why didn't she tell him this whole martial law thing was coming? She must've known.

Sydal didn't want to even seriously consider that Maria wasn't Maria, but a monster pretending to be her. He'd seen firsthand what they could do, with Bausman. Try as he might, he couldn't stop himself from imagining what she could do to their children, who were practically helpless.

Sydal's heart sank when he saw the line for the buses back to the dark side. They must've been at least two hours long, maybe more. Now was a perfect time to play his trump card, his badge and job.

"Sorry, excuse me, official police business, excuse me," Sydal walked through the throngs of people in line as they cursed him under their breath. They complained. But what could they do? He was a cop, and they weren't. Perks like that came with the job.

SYDAL STRUGGLED to stay conscious as he sat in a window seat on a thruster bus from the Lunar Dome to the dark side, forehead against the cold window. Less than an hour earlier, he'd emerged from the tunnels and sewers beneath Earth's moon with more questions than answers about his world and what was really going on behind the curtain.

He'd hoped that getting away from the Lunar Dome might ease some of his anxiety, being one step closer to home and all. But the sight out his window did little to engender calm.

UEF military transports had landed all over the moon's surface. They were really coming in with force to uphold this whole 'martial law' thing. Understandably, that had him a bit worried. But what really caught his attention were the fleets in space, flying over and past the moon. Each one of them had to be going somewhere, and in those numbers, it couldn't have been for anything good. He, like the rest of people in human-occupied space, was hoping that the war was winding down, not ramping up.

Just like there was a line to board transports off and out of the Lunar Dome, there was a line of transports waiting their turn to dock at the dark side. Cheaper and more blue-collar, it was where the majority of the moon's population lived, so it was a sizable backup.

“HUD, call Maria,” ordered Sydal. If he got what he was convinced was some manner of creature or impostor that was pretending to be his wife, maybe he could have some of his fears for his children relieved.

She didn't pick up. That just sent the detective's mind into a tailspin.

Why didn't she pick up? Where is she? Is she with the kids? Are they okay? She didn't ki—...no, don't think that way. They're fine. Keep telling yourself that. They're fine.

If Sydal could've, he would've hopped out of the bus and gone the rest of the way on foot, the cold be damned. But unfortunately, he wouldn't make it more than a couple of steps before dying. And if he were dead, he couldn't help and protect his kids.

Sydal shot up out of his seat after the bus he was in waited five minutes without moving. He made his way to the front of the bus, past his fellow passengers, who were just as confused as to what was happening but couldn't have been as scared, because none of them knew what was really happening below the moon. None of them knew about the creatures that lived among them. Or did they?

As Sydal made his way up to the front of the bus, he suspiciously surveyed his fellow passengers. Any one of them could've been like Bausman. If a commuter looked even a little different than the norm, he eyed them up and down well enough for them to notice and be uncomfortable; then he moved forward.

“Sydal, Lunar Police. Is there any way around this line of buses? Maybe another entrance that no one uses? Another docking point?” he asked when he reached the bus driver.

“Afraid not, Detective. We gotta wait, just like the rest of them,” answered a tired-looking bus driver who was obviously annoyed to have to deal with so much drama on what usually was an easy shift.

“What if it's for official police business?”

“Is this official police business?”

“Yeah, sure.”

“I'm afraid the answer is still no. We really don't have a choice.”

“Shit.” Sydal turned away from the bus driver. He looked towards the very back, where there was an airlocked hatch with a mini-rover inside. Meant as a lifeboat for stranded buses, the idea was that the mini-rover could be taken out by any stranded passengers or drivers, to find help in the nearest habitat. “Does that still work?”

“What? The mini-rover? I guess so. I mean, as long as I’ve been driving this bus it’s never been used, so maybe?”

“I’m taking it,” declared Sydal as he hurried away from the front of the bus towards the back.

“I don’t know if that’s a great idea, Detective!” The bus driver tried to shout a warning to Sydal as he hurried towards the back, but Sydal barely heard him.

Sydal tried to turn the wheel on the hatch in the back of the bus. It barely budged, so he used a lot more elbow grease. The other passengers gave him strange looks, but he didn’t care. As far as he was concerned, he was in a bus full of suspects, and he needed get home and save his children via any means available to him.

“Son of a...got it!” Sydal was finally able to turn the wheel. He opened up the airtight lock, letting out a whooshing noise. Without wasting a second, he climbed in and closed the door behind him.

The mini-rover lived up to its name. Sydal barely fit behind the wheel, his knees up on each side. Calling it cramped would be generous, but that was okay. All he cared about was using it to go the fifty to one hundred yards to the dark side facilities. For that brief time, he could endure it.

“HUD, I’m ready for departure,” said Sydal after checking all the levels and instruments, making sure the old mini-rover still had structural and life support integrity. Everything looked green, so he was ready to go. “Disengage.”

The mini-rover fell off the bus like an acorn from a tree. Onboard gyroscopes compensated for the impact of hitting the lunar surface. Immediately, Sydal started to drive.

“Warning, life support systems compromised. Warning, life support systems compromised. Losing oxygen.” A robotic woman’s voice kept blaring through Sydal’s HUD. It was just what he needed, losing air as he hurried towards the nearest rover dock.

Sydal did his best to try and ignore the alarms going off in his HUD and the mini-rover. He tried his best to ignore his dwindling supply of oxygen.

Just keep going. Don’t pay attention to it. You’ll make it.

Sydal pushed his mini-rover to its limit, hurrying over to the line of rovers waiting patiently for their turn to dock. Then, automated piloting systems in the rovers would make them drive to the nearby lot on their own and neatly get in line. Sydal had no time for such patience.

As he drove past the line of disgruntled rover owners, who beeped at him on the way, Sydal felt the grip of oxygen deprivation take hold. The problem was, they were dangerous but felt amazing at the same time. His head got light, his thoughts happier, and he felt high.

“Unregistered rover, this is dock control. You need to return to the back of the line and wait your turn like everyone else.” A bored man’s voice sounded in Sydal’s HUD.

“Dock control, this is Sydal, here on official bussssss...” *Get a hold of yourself, Rowan.* “I’m here on police business. I need to dock immediately, life support failing. If you need it, priority override code, Echo, Bravo—”

“Okay, okay, you’re next, Detective. Just hang tight.” The dock control operator didn’t want to hear it.

The second he got off the mini-rover and stepped onto the dock concourse, Sydal braced himself against one wall and took some deep breaths. That was a close one. His desire to get home to his kids had almost just cost him his life, but it couldn’t stop him.

Crowded, chaotic, the dark side’s docking concourse was different than that in the Lunar Dome. The Lunar Dome’s docks were for ship building and ship docking. The dark side was only transit vehicles and rovers, which meant they were more used, more crowded. Finding his way through those throngs of people was a lot harder, made worse by the presence of soldiers shouting orders and trying to gain control and organization by force. Which, of course, didn’t work.

Armed with a one-track mind and the last bits of adrenaline left over from his ordeals, Sydal somehow willed his exhausted body through the hordes of dark-side residents, out of the docking concourse. He entered the halls of the facility proper and headed towards the residential areas, Section G in particular. But to get there, he had to pass through the sections before it.

Things weren’t any better in the dark side’s residential sections. Everyone hurried to get home as soldiers, guns out and on show, corralled and tried to herd people back to their homes. They wanted more than anything for people to get inside their apartments and stay inside. No one could give a real reason why, though. At first it was just unpleasant, but then it took a turn when the detective entered Section C.

It wasn’t clear why the soldiers had skipped the first couple of dark side residential sections. But in Section C, Sydal came face-to-face with a horse

of a different color. Cultists, out in the open, not hiding in the shadows as per usual, were accompanied by UEF soldiers, going door-to-door, taking some residents with them. The residents, lined up in the middle of the hall shackled to each other, came in all shapes, sizes, ages and races. And all of them had something in common: none of them looked like they had any idea what was going on.

“What the hell is going on here!?” Sydal approached the nearest soldier and demanded to know. As much as he wanted to protect his kids, he couldn’t in good conscience just walk by his fellow lunar citizens being treated so poorly.

“Move along, sir,” answered the soldier.

“Screw that. I’m a detective with the Lunar Police. I demand to know why the hell you’re rounding up citizens. Do you have warrants?”

“Move along, Detective. Trust me.”

“And why are you working with cultists?”

The soldier lost his patience and responded by hitting Sydal in his stomach with the butt of his gun. Lacking the strength to react, block, or fight back, the detective toppled over and felt like he was going to throw up from the blow.

“I told you to move along! Now you’re going with them.” The soldier that hit Sydal took out a pair of magnetic cuffs when he was stopped by a stern voice behind him.

“Let him go, Private. He’s local law enforcement and deserves the proper respect for his position.” A tall, skinny man in a UEF uniform stood above Sydal with his hand outstretched. “Sorry about the private’s overzealousness, Detective. These are tense times. I’m sure you understand.”

Sydal didn’t trust the tall man, but he took his hand anyway, if for no other reason than he wasn’t sure if he had the strength to get up on his own. Once he did, he was pulled up to his feet, stomach still hurting.

“Captain Hedlund, UEF Marines,” the tall man introduced himself. “Sorry about the trouble, Detective...” Hedlund looked in his HUD at Sydal’s digital badge. “Sydal. You look like you’ve been through hell. Are you all right?”

Sydal hardly heard the polite Marine captain. He was too busy witnessing crying kids being torn from their parents, and vice versa. He

watched the elderly being dragged out of their homes, shackled and lined up. He watched the cultists take joy in their assistance in this process.

“Am I all right? What the hell is going on here, Captain? By whose authority are you detaining these lunar citizens?”

“By authority of the Prime Minister back on Earth, Detective. I’m not a fan of it either, but these people have been marked as AIC collaborators. We’ve been ordered to arrest them,” explained Hedlund.

“You’ve been ordered to arrest the young and the elderly?” Sydal wasn’t buying it. Something was rotten here. “Why are you working with these damn cultist psychos?”

“Like I said. I don’t like it, but orders are orders. I’m sure you understand. You look like you’ve been through the wringer; do you need an escort back to your apartment, sir?”

“I’m fine, I’ll be fine. I can make it on my own.” Sydal refused any help.

“Okay. Understood. Go home, Detective. If you have a family, spend some time with them. Tell them it’s going to be okay. All of this bother will blow over soon enough. You’ll see,” Hedlund tried to reassure Sydal. It didn’t work.

Sydal didn’t answer. Instead he pushed his way through the commotion and made for the next residential section. To his dismay there were more soldiers working with cultists, rounding people up. He shuddered to think what they were being rounded up for, but that was a battle for another day. He had to keep his eye on the prize.

Fear suddenly took hold of Sydal as he stood outside his family’s apartment door. It wasn’t the first time he’d felt it since leaving so many hours earlier, but it was the first time it froze him in place. What was he going to find behind that door, and could he handle it if it was something terrible?

Sydal thought about knocking on the door, though he thought better of it. If his wife was aware of what was going on outside, then she’d probably think he was a cultist, a soldier, or both. Instead his hand shook as he reached for the hand scanner.

THE FIRST THING Sydal saw when he entered his apartment made his heart sink. There was blood all over the family room floor. Upon further investigation, there was more in the kitchen, along with bloody handprints. From their size, they belonged to an adult woman, probably Maria.

There was a pot of tomato sauce boiling over on the stove. From the smell, it was also burnt. A bowl of spaghetti sat on the counter. On the table there were three place settings.

“Rebecca! Matthew!” yelled Sydal as the search for his kids continued. All the while he took out his pistol, prepared to shoot his wife. That reality didn’t hit him until he felt the cold steel in his hand. He was prepared to shoot the love of his life, the mother of his children. Could he really do it?

Sydal noticed both his kids’ room door and his bedroom door were closed and locked. The kids’ door had huge dents in the metal from the inside. Something or someone was trying to bust their way out. Had the kids manage to trap Maria in their bedroom and flee to their room?

Sydal stopped right before he knocked on his kids’ bedroom door. What if Maria was in there? He sure as hell didn’t want to let her out, and it would make more sense to get the kids first. Standing there for a second, trying to decide what to do, he tried to put the sight and implications of all that blood out of his head.

Suddenly something hit Sydal’s kids’ bedroom door from the inside. From the sound, it hit it hard. It was accompanied by a shriek that made his ears ring. That also spurred another noise.

Matthew?

Sydal heard his son’s cries coming from his and Maria’s bedroom. The sound of whatever was in the kids’ room must’ve scared him. That was it. The decision was made for the detective.

Without wasting a moment, Sydal hurried over to his and Maria’s bedroom, expecting to see his frightened children inside. One of them must’ve been hurt; he took a deep breath to try and prepare himself for it. Emergency services were already brought up and ready to be dialed in his HUD.

“Maria?” Sydal was surprised when his bedroom door slid open and there, huddled in the far corner, was his wife, covered in blood, tears in her eyes, clutching Matthew in her arms. She was in such a state of shock, she didn’t even seem to notice her husband’s arrival.

“What the hell is going on here? Are you all right?” Sydal’s mind was like a hurricane. There was so much going on, he had a hard time putting together what was happening and what had already happened. He stepped over a blood-covered knife from the kitchen and knelt down in front of his wife.

“It’s not her. I don’t know what but it’s not, our baby, it’s not, what did I do?” Maria was in a state of complete panic and mania. She mumbled incoherently as she maintained a death grip on their son.

“It’s okay, honey. Just, give me Matthew. Is he hurt?” Sydal first tried to gently get his son out of his clearly traumatized wife’s clutches, but her grip was like iron. So he had to pry her fingers open one by one, then her arms, before finally getting Matthew free.

Scared out of his mind, Matthew was sobbing. Sydal hurried over to the bed and put his eight-year-old son on top of it. Quickly but thoroughly, he checked his whole body for a cut, scratch, bruise, anything. Matthew was fine, at least physically.

“What happened, Maria? Where’s Rebecca?” Sydal sat Matthew down on the bed against the headboard.

“I...I don’t know,” answered Maria. She had a thousand-mile stare straight at the opposite wall.

“What do you mean you don’t...” Sydal took a second to calm down. “Okay. Whose blood is this?” He knelt back down in front of his wife, making sure to kick the knife further away.

“What?” Maria snapped out of it and looked into her husband’s eyes. “Rowan? Rowan, thank God you’re here!” She hugged Sydal, who politely patted her on the back. Her shirt was soaked with blood.

“Whose blood is this? What happened?”

“I, uh...” Maria tried to get her head right to explain to her husband. All the while, Sydal checked her body for injuries. It didn’t take long for him to find several deep slashes and cuts on her torso and arms. They looked a lot like the injury he’d suffered on his chest.

“Where’s Rebecca?” repeated Sydal.

“She’s in the kids’ room. But it’s not her...I, she, you’re not going to believe me, but I had to do what I had to do. I had to protect our son from her.” Again, Maria wasn’t making much sense. At least, she wouldn’t have if Sydal had never had the run-in with Fredrich Bausman back at Aitken Basin.

If what she's saying is true...no, I can't believe that.

Sydal paused for a moment, and tried to rationalize what was happening in his mind. He was sure that his wife hadn't been who she said she was for a couple of weeks now. But it wasn't her that was setting off his cop senses; it was their daughter. How, though? And could she really be one of those things, his only daughter?

"Wait here. When I get back, I need you to tell me exactly what happened." Sydal stood up and left his bedroom. He needed to get supplies to clean up and patch his wife's wounds, or she might bleed out. Plus, he needed a moment to mentally digest what was happening.

Maria Sydal was a strong woman, mentally and physically. She was a veteran, a soldier. So for her to be in the state that Sydal found her in, something terrible must have happened. As much as he didn't want to believe it, Rowan had to consider that his darling daughter—no, something pretending to be her—was in the kids' bedroom, fighting to get out and murder them all. What was he going to do? Could he put down something wearing Rebecca's face, if necessary? And wasn't it his responsibility to do so?

Sydal grabbed a medical kit, a wet towel and a dry one. Then he hurried back in the direction of their bedroom. His shoes slid across the blood on the floor, and then out from under him. He fell hard, bracing the impact with one elbow.

His elbow screaming at him, Sydal entered the bedroom and quickly got to work on Maria. He warned her that it was going to hurt as he first used the wet towel to wipe the blood off and away from his wife's wounds. Once they were cleaned up some, he dried them off and wiped off any excess gore with the dry towel.

"I know it's hard. But I need you to tell me exactly what happened here, Maria. I need you to. Please." Sydal opened the medical kit and took out a stim shot. He was about to administer it, but Maria waved him off.

"No drugs. I have to...I want to think straight." Maria was a little calmer. She started to make sense again. Instead of looking at her wounds and the work her husband was doing to treat them, she looked and smiled at Matthew, who was still terrified, silently crying on the bed.

"You sure? This is gonna hurt," warned Sydal, who'd also somehow managed to get hold of himself. He had to. Whatever happened to Rebecca, he had a duty to protect his wife and son.

Maria nodded.

“So what happened?” asked Sydal as he took out the flesh fuser. He started with the wounds on his wife’s arm. She squealed a bit in pain as the device got to work, cauterizing her injuries. It smelled like burnt hair and seared meat.

“I, uh...we were getting ready to sit down and eat dinner. I was going to wait for you, but hadn’t heard a thing for hours. Tried to call you, but the call wasn’t going through for whatever reason. Where were you, by the way?” asked Maria, suddenly very cognizant of what was going on.

“It’s a long story. I’ll tell you later, but right now—”

“Rebecca. Yeah, I know,” Maria continued. “I had the kids wash their hands and set the table as I finished cooking some pasta. Was gonna make spaghetti and...then we heard the sirens.”

“The sirens?”

“Yeah, the...you didn’t hear them? They were loud as hell.”

No, I didn’t hear the sirens. I was fighting for my life underneath the surface of this here moon.

Sydal shook his head.

“Anyway, I heard the sirens. Then I noticed, was it when I was putting the pasta in the, you know, the bowl we use, the serving bowl, that Rebecca wasn’t at the table.” Maria’s eyes darted around at nothing in particular as she tried to remember exactly what had happened so she could tell her husband.

“Where was she?”

“She was, I found her in her room. She was standing at the window just staring at, I honestly don’t know. I kept calling her name, telling her it was time to eat, but she didn’t budge. She just stood there as the siren blared. Then, as soon as it stopped, I don’t know, it was like a switch was flipped or something, because she snapped out of it. When she turned and looked at me, I knew it wasn’t her. Her eyes—God, Rowan, her eyes...” Maria got upset as she told Sydal what happened, and she remembered seeing that twisted version of the sweet little girl she’d given birth to, raised, and loved more than anything in the whole world. Her and her brother.

“They were black and shiny? Like lava rock?” Sydal hated hearing it, but he knew where his wife was going.

“Yes! Like obsidian! How’d you know?”

“That’s not our daughter.” Sydal finished with the wounds on his wife’s arms. He was about to move on to the wounds to her torso, but stopped before he did. “You sure you don’t want the stim? This is gonna hurt a lot more than your arms. Plus, we got to get the hell out of this apartment.”

“Yes, I’m sure. I can take it.”

“I know you can. Anyway, you were saying, you saw her eyes and then what?” Sydal did genuinely want to know what had happened, but mostly he needed to distract his wife from the pain to come as he took the flesh fuser to her stomach.

“I uh, okay, so it wasn’t just her eyes. I don’t know how to explain it, but her arm, it changed. It got longer, and it was covered in, I don’t know, spikes or blades or something. I know it sounds crazy but her little body, oh God, her little body, it— Ow!” Maria jumped as she felt the electrical arc from the flesh fuser hit a literal nerve.

“Told you. You sure?”

“Fine! Give me the damn shot!” Maria gave in. She looked at her husband. Now out of the shock from what had happened to her, she saw just how bad a shape he was in himself. “Maybe you need one too.”

“Oh, believe me, I’ll take one, but first I’m gonna finish with you. What happened?” Without warning, Sydal stabbed his wife in her thigh with the stim injection pen. “What happened next?”

Maria took a moment to let the warm wave of pain killers rush over her. Then, with her pain muted, she continued. “Her body it warped and twisted, changed into different things. Then she ran at me.” She grabbed her husband by his arm. “I didn’t know what to do. I mean, I was scared, but that was still our little girl. Then she started cutting me. I didn’t feel it at first, though I knew what was happening. Instead I tried to grab her, hug her, you know? Restrain her, but I couldn’t. So you understand I had to protect Matthew. So I ran into the kitchen and grabbed a knife, just for protection. I didn’t want to use it. You have to believe me, I didn’t!”

“I know you didn’t. I know.” Sydal continued trying to treat his wife when he noticed a wound he hadn’t seen before in his initial look-over. She had a puncture wound, a deep one, in her side that was pumping out really dark, almost black blood. The whole world went silent.

From the location of the wound—between the ribs below Maria’s breast—and the color of the blood, Sydal knew his wife had suffered a lacerated liver. He wasn’t a doctor, so of course he didn’t know for sure, but he’d

seen murder victims who took bullets or knives to their livers. Bile mixed with their blood, turning it almost black. Seeing as they were victims, none of them survived.

“What? What is it?” Maria noticed the change on her husband’s face.

Sydal forced a smile and cleaned up the newly-discovered wound. Then he went about sealing it, knowing that that wouldn’t be enough to save her.

“Nothing. Just, nothing at all. You did what you had to do, baby. You saved our son.” Sydal concentrated on sealing the liver lac as he talked.

Maria was silent for a moment. Then she pushed her husband away. At first he looked at her, confused, but when she did it again, he knew that she knew what was happening to her.

“Now it’s your turn. You have to protect him, for the both of us.”

“No, we’ll protect him. You’re gonna be—”

“Fine?” Maria smiled. “No, we both know I’m not.”

Tears started to stream down Sydal’s cheeks. He tried to stop them, he tried to be strong for his wife and son; but at that point, he physically couldn’t. So they flowed.

“Shhhh,” Maria put one soft hand on the side of her husband’s cheek. “It’s okay. You’re going to be okay. I’m sorry I couldn’t, sorry about Rebecca. Really, I am. I couldn’t save her.”

“No, it wasn’t your fault. She was—”

“Shhhh. Can you...” Maria pointed weakly over at Matthew.

Sydal picked his son up off the bed and put him in his dying mother’s lap. That was it. The detective’s whole world had just shattered in a matter of twenty-four hours or so. What was he going to do? He was so lost in his own grief and thoughts he didn’t hear the last words between his wife and their son.

“God, I love you, Matthew. I need you to always remember that, okay? And be good for your father. He’s gonna need your help, my little man,” Maria managed to hold off going into full sobbing, but tears ran down her cheeks as well.

“I can, I’m calling emergency services. Maybe they can save you. I just need you to stay awake!” Sydal went into a panic himself. He was about to order his HUD to call help when Maria leaned forward and kissed him. It was the last thing she ever did. Her body, bereft of life, stayed leaned forward, hair hanging down, covering her face.

“I...” Sydal’s lip quivered as he felt the last spark of life leave his wife’s body. He stood up, wiping his nose and eyes. Then he picked up Matthew and left his and his wife’s bedroom.

Almost catatonic, Sydal slowly walked into the kitchen and put his son down on the counter. He turned off the stove, then calmly grabbed a couple of backpacks, filling them with water bottles and food.

“Daddy, are we leaving?” asked Matthew.

“Yeah, champ, we’re going on a trip.”

“A trip? Are mommy and Rebecca coming?”

Sydal stopped for a moment. Then he answered. “No, this is a boy’s trip. Us guys only, okay?” He jumped when he heard a bang at the kid’s bedroom door. Bracing himself with both hands on the counter, he lowered his head and cursed under his breath.

“Daddy?”

“C’mon, Matthew. We need to go.”

FOUR

SAVIORS AND DEBTS

“WHY ARE you telling me this right now? Didn’t you hear what I told you? We need to go to Europa, as fast as we possibly can.” Ben walked alongside the floating stasis pod his father had been put into as soon as Engano’s fighter docked on the AIC *Veruvian*, a dreadnought among the fleet that had assaulted the Shapeless’ flagship.

“You asked how I was still alive.” Engano walked with Ben on the other side of Lee Saito’s stasis pod. She’d just told him how she’d used the cover of the first wave of attacks on the Shapeless to slip away and get a warning to the rest of the AIC spread out across the various united colonies that made up her government. “I did my job. They needed to know that their capital had fallen and that a new threat, much worse than the fascist UEF, was out there and could be coming to their planets next.”

“I know, I was just, I don’t know, I was expecting a short little explanation, not a long drawn-out tale.”

“Excuse me for being thorough. Anyway, thought you might’ve liked to hear it, if nothing else to get your mind off of his father here and what you went through. Speaking of, this one is going to need a little explaining. I don’t think the captain of this dreadnought is going to appreciate having someone who was infected by these things on board, let alone one he’d been fighting for years.”

“Fighting and losing to,” pointed out Ben.

“My point exactly. I can only protect the two of you so much.”

“I understand. I’ll explain it to the captain myself.”

Ben and Engano were silent for a moment. They really didn’t know each other very well, making their interactions somewhat awkward. Add to

that the fact that each was withholding information from the other, and things felt weird.

“How did you find me?” asked Ben, after taking a second to think about it. How *did* Engano find him? Escaping the bombing of the bunker and gathering this fleet, attacking the Shapeless flagship, those were one thing. But what other reason would there have been for her to risk her own safety, stopping and looking inside, if she didn’t know he was there?

“Bugged you. Bugged the lot of you, actually,” Engano casually confirmed.

“What? When?”

“When we fed you in the bunker. Slipped tracking nanites into your water. I know where all of you have been since then. Been keeping a close eye, as a matter of fact.”

Ben put aside his outrage at being unwittingly bugged, and focused on the latter part of what Engano had just told him. If she’d been keeping an eye on everyone, suffice it to say, she would know where his friends were and if they were still alive. “Where are the others?” he asked.

“Oh, you mean your friends who deserted you?”

“That’s not—”

Engano waved his objection away. “Kidding, of course. They’re on Europa.”

Kidding? Ben couldn’t decide if he should be outraged or impressed that she still had a sense of humor in all this. He decided to just let it go. “Europa? As in—”

“The moon in the Earth system, yes,” she said. “And some of the most contested dirt in the galaxy. And”—she paused—“other things.”

Ben shook his head. He was pleased that they’d done as he asked and left him behind. If they hadn’t, chances were they all would have been in worse shape. Plus they needed to get to and destroy the remaining planet-killer, hiding there under the bodies, wreckage, and black soil. “And they’re all okay?”

“They’re still breathing.” The volume of Engano’s voice lowered drastically. “As far as I can tell. But you might want to keep anything past that to yourself. Some here might not be thrilled to hear about plans to destroy their secret weapon.”

Ben stopped. “How do you—”

Again, Engano waved away his words. “Save it.”

Ben was happy to hear that his friends had not only made it off Vassar-1 alive, but they were continuing the fight. Any one of them could have easily peeled off and run for the comforts of home, and no one would have blamed them, not after what they'd been through.

His happiness came to an end when they reached the *Veruvian's* briefing room, full of AIC officers.

Decidedly in hostile territory, Ben knew he needed to choose his words wisely. From the looks on the AIC officers' faces, they knew who he was, and knew very well who was in the stasis pod floating in front of him and Engano. That was especially true for a sixty-something-year-old man with remarkably good hair, a gray beard bisected by a scar on his cheek, and striking piercing blue eyes. Clearly in charge, he had that aura about him. Ben knew who he was looking at.

"Captain Rhule, this is—" Engano was about to make introductions, but the bearded blue-eyed AIC captain cut him off.

"Ben Saito, formerly Lieutenant Commander Ben Saito. I know. What I don't know, Director, is why he's on my ship, in my briefing room, and not in chains. Not only is he a deserter and traitor to his own nation, but he's a pirate to boot." Rhule stared holes through Ben, as did his lieutenants, sergeants, and corporals.

"Uhhh." Ben didn't know what to say to that.

"Because this man has been fighting our new enemy longer than everyone in this room combined," Engano said coolly. "Because he and his crew were the first to discover their existence, and he knows why they came here and what they want. Because he's fought them and lived and wants nothing more than to see those who destroyed our capitol to be dead, buried, and forgotten." Engano jutted out her chin. She outranked everyone in the room, and seemed to relish it. "Are those good enough reasons?"

"Perhaps," Rhule said, unruffled by Engano's little speech. "And his father? A great man, for sure, but we have reports that he was corrupted by our enemy. The 'Saviors' somehow turned him into one of their own."

Ben understood where Rhule was coming from. If their positions were swapped, he'd probably harbor the same valid concerns. After all, everyone on that dreadnought was Rhule's responsibility. Their lives hinged on his decisions.

"They did. Turn him," answered Ben.

Engano gave him a 'shut the fuck up' look. "He was infected, in a way."

“Infected?” Rhule asked. “Isn’t that another word for contagious? Why not just blow him out the airlock?”

“You touch him, I’ll—”

“Do nothing,” Engano snapped. She looked at Rhule. “He’s in no way contagious. This was part of the reason why I brought them on board the *Veruvian*, Captain. Not only did Ben here find a way to clear his father of said....influence, but we both stumbled upon information vital to our fight against this enemy. A fight that, make no mistakes, gentlemen, is far from over.”

“We just destroyed their flagship,” Rhule said. “There are men arriving planetside right now to wipe out the rest of the creatures and the cultists as we speak. While it might not be over, it looks like it’s pretty close to the finish line, Director.”

“How are your boys doing down there planetside, ‘mopping up’?” asked Ben. “How’s that going? What are they armed with? Rifles? Grenades? Maybe some light artillery? Hmmm, how’s that working out?”

Rhule shifted his attention to Ben. He answered with another icy stare.

“You need to pull back your men on the ground, Captain,” Ben said. “They need to be rearmed. Traditional weapons will not kill these things.”

“I’ve yet to meet anything a bullet or a cannon can’t kill.”

“Until now,” Engano said.

“With all due respect, Captain,” Ben said, “you and your men didn’t destroy shit. We took down their flagship with a handful of missiles, while you wasted hundreds because we were properly armed.”

“I’m getting tired of the vagaries, Director. Either you can give me the information you clearly want to, or you and the traitors can get the hell off my ship.”

Engano looked to Ben. “Well?”

“Where should I start?”

“How’s about with what exactly we’re dealing with?” Rhule asked.

“The Oblivion cult calls them ‘Saviors,’” Ben said. “But we’ve been referring to them as ‘the Shapeless’. We don’t know where they came from, but we do know that they didn’t just find us. I have reason to believe that it wasn’t the cult that summoned them.”

“You have reason to believe?” One of Rhule’s eyebrows raised.

“Evidence we’ve gathered supports that conclusion,” Engano said.

“Of course,” Rhule said. “The queen of intelligence. Didn’t help us much out here.”

Engano ignored him. “I’ve never been an optimist, Captain, and I’m not going to start now. As far as I’m concerned, we ventured to corners of the universe we were never meant to see, let alone live in. These things were always there, just waiting for their next victims.”

“Spare me the philosophizing,” Rhule said. “What exactly are we fighting? I don’t care about where they came from or how we met them. How do we kill them?”

“We don’t know what they are, technically,” Ben said. He looked at Engano for confirmation, just in case she had some data he didn’t. She shook her head. “What we do know is they’re as strong as they are tough. On foot they outclass our soldiers by quite a bit. Standard high-velocity bullets aren’t going to even slow them down. Explosives like grenades aren’t going to do much, unless it’s a direct hit. Small arms and blades... might as well be throwing stones.”

“Are you telling us that they’re basically invincible?” asked one of Rhule’s lieutenants.

“Not at all,” Engano said. “Just that they’re very hard to kill.”

“Extreme heat and extreme cold; they can’t tolerate either. Anything like a flamethrower or cold-cast gun, that’ll kill them,” added Ben. “Electricity. They have a hard time dealing with any big jolts. And Herald Stones. Those are the most effective.”

“Herald Stones?” Rhule frowned.

“Uh, right,” Ben said. Rhule hadn’t heard of that. Nobody had. He reached into his pocket and felt the baseball-sized rock. It wasn’t clear to him whether or not he should produce it there and then. Something so valuable, it might be confiscated, and he would almost certainly still need it.

He almost pulled it out. Almost. But instead, he described it.

“They look like a simple chunk of lava rock, obsidian. I have reason to believe they’re somehow linked with where these things come from. They’re also their biggest weakness. Not only does direct contact with them seem to kill the creatures, but they also use them to power their ships, their soldiers, everything.”

Engano glanced sideways at Ben. He’d explained this to her previously, but whether she believed it, he wasn’t sure. It certainly wasn’t information she’d picked up through her contacts. Frankly, Ben didn’t actually know if

it was true; not all of it. He had hurt the Shapeless with it, yes, but the larger implications of it were untested.

“So without these ... rocks ... they can’t function,” Rhule said. “But they’re also, what, deathly allergic to them?”

“Allergic? No, more like fatally averse to them.”

“And you vouch for this, Madam Director?” Rhule asked, a hint of incredulity in his voice.

“I do.”

Rhule grunted. “Then the real question becomes: how do we get our hands on these ‘Herald Stones’?”

“We don’t,” answered Engano.

Her answer took everyone in the briefing room by surprise, even Ben.

“What do you mean, we don’t?” Rhule asked. “We clearly need them. Especially if traditional weapons won’t work.”

“We’ve been looking for these stones for a while. We can’t get to them. Blame AIC intel if you want, but even the UEF has failed. Not that they really knew what they were looking for. Most of us just thought they were, at most, exotic rocks with strange energy readings that somehow affected the cultists that worshiped them. We’ve had at least a dozen leads that didn’t pan out. The cultists treat them like gold, and for the longest time, we assumed their influence was limited to the cultists themselves. Maybe it made them hallucinate or feel some sort of rush they mistook for feeling God or whatever.”

“So you have none?”

The rock in Ben’s pocket felt heavier, but he stuck to his guns and kept it a secret. Part of him just knew that he would need it. Then Engano surprised him again.

“In the end, we found only one, on Vassar-1. I have said rock.”

Rhule perked up. “Okay, so is it not big enough to share? Can we replicate it, its properties?”

Engano shook her head. “Not possible, unfortunately. There’s elements in the rock that we don’t even have a name for, let alone the technology or means to fabricate them. I’m afraid my rock is all we’ve got, and I used part of it as a tip of the missile I fired into the mother ship to destroy it.”

“Do you have suggestions on what we can do to win this fight, Madam Director, or are you just going to keep telling us what we can’t do?” Rhule asked, his frustration growing.

“Re-equip your ships and your men,” Ben said. “You need to switch from traditional projectiles—missiles, bullets—to anything with thermite, incendiary rounds. I, we, can show you how to set up missiles that deliver electric shocks instead of explosives. Weaponize your engineering armory, the torches and cold casters. You need to think about fighting them with the elements instead of ordnance.”

Rhule and all of his officers in the *Veruvian* briefing room looked at Ben with one eyebrow up. They were silent for a moment. He fidgeted uncomfortably. Not only was he among all military men, a life he’d willfully left, but they were part of the military he and his father had fought for almost two decades in bitter, ruthless war.

“Do you have any idea how long that’s going to take?” asked one of Rhule’s lieutenants.

“Do you have any idea what will happen if you go into a fight with these things unprepared?” retorted Ben.

Rhule crossed his arms. He glanced at Engano, his features hardening. “Make no mistake, Mr. Saito. The Director is the only reason you aren’t dead or in chains. I’ll take your advice under consideration.”

As Rhule talked to Ben, two soldiers—guards—walked up on either side of him and Engano. “I trust your desire to want to defeat this enemy. I trust the blood that runs through your veins. Your father, I’ve fought him more times than I can count, and I have nothing but the deepest respect for him. But I don’t trust you. Until we get to Europa, you’ll be detained along with your father in the brig. Once we get there and we defeat your former brothers and sisters, we’ll decide your fate.”

Ben felt heavy hands on his shoulders. He glanced at Engano. She nodded. “Go with them. I’ll have you out of there in no time.”

“I’m not sure I buy that—”

One of the hands on his shoulder yanked him around sharply. “Let’s move,” a soldier snapped into Ben’s face. “Now.”

He smashed his rifle butt into Ben’s midsection, or at least he tried. Ben reflexively spun away and smashed his robotic arm into the soldier’s chest. The man stumbled back and fell hard on his ass, wheezing for breath.

Before he could think of what he’d done, Ben felt cold metal on the back of his neck.

“You’re a deserter,” said Rhule into his ear, whispering loudly for all to hear. Ben realized it was Rhule’s pistol that was resting on the base of his

skull. Rhule had a strong grip on Ben's robotic arm. As long as he stayed very close, Ben had no advantage. "A UEF deserter, at that. Killing you won't bring me any repercussions at all. So don't tempt me."

Ben nodded his agreement. "Sorry, it won't happen again." And he meant it. The man had simply surprised him, or at least, Ben told himself that. It would be stupid to pick a fight in these circumstances.

"See that it doesn't," Rhule said. "Or I'll see to it permanently."

The cool metal pulled away from his neck, and Ben was released.

The soldier he'd punched was on his feet again, and staring daggers into Ben. But he just ignored him. "Out in no time, huh?" he asked Engano.

"You don't make anything easy, do you, Mr. Saito?" she said.

"I'm working on it," he said, as the soldiers led him away.

FIVE

DIPLOMACY

CAPTAIN DAISON WAN was on his knees in the black dirt of Europa. His hands were restrained behind his back via magnetic shackles that forced his wrists together. Blood trickled down his split bottom lip, courtesy of an asshole's rifle butt. He really regretted being trying to be diplomatic.

Ten minutes earlier, Wan had been standing outside his ship, the pirate corsair *Orion*, with his hands up in the air. He wanted to show that he would peacefully surrender. There was no reason to get into a fight. Plus it was just him, Tonga, and Falcon. Whatever his reputation, his prime was behind him. He was a better drinker than a fighter these days. Tonga was as ferocious as they came, but he had a broken arm and a concussion. And Falcon, well, he didn't know the last time his cyborg pilot had last undocked from his console. So a fight wouldn't have turned out well.

Wan's instinct was to run, not surrender. He'd spent enough time in the universe's jails, AIC and UEF both, to know that he didn't want to go back to another one. But his ship was crippled. The only crew that had survived the landing and stayed behind were working on fixing it and weren't exactly warriors themselves.

"Be diplomatic," recited Wan out loud. He clenched and unclenched his fists. Wan naturally hated authority figures of any kind. It was just in his blood. From the looks of the two ships approaching, with black dust clouds kicked up behind them, they were authority figures. They were military.

"I've got an ID on those ships, Captain. They're two military-class armored transports. AIC, by the looks of their codes. They're hailing us. What do you want me to say?" asked Falcon through Wan's HUD.

“Tell them we’re refugees from Vassar-1. Maybe that will garner us some sympathy,” instructed Wan.

Ten minutes later, Wan watched helplessly as two AIC soldiers, in full gear, shot two of his crew members who were helpless, unarmed, and surrendering. His fists clenched again, this time out of sheer anger. They were going to pay for that. They were going to pay for what they did to him and his crew.

Tonga was thrown onto the ground next to Wan, also in magnetic restraints. Despite being told that the man was injured, the AIC soldiers kicked him in his gut and laughed. After killing his crew, the bastards laughed.

Normally Wan could talk his way out of anything, when he was given a chance to talk. But these men were only interested in killing.

Wan was helpless. He looked at his ship, his baby. Still burning behind the pilot’s console was poor Falcon. Unable to disengage from the pilot’s console before the soldiers barged into the command bridge, he’d taken a bullet to the back of his head. Then they left a phosphorous grenade behind to completely burn his body and burn out the ship. Wan didn’t see it, but he could imagine it. He wasn’t sure which would have been worse: his own eyes witnessing the deed, or his imagination conjuring up images over and over. Either way, it would haunt him.

“Okay, pirate scum. Up, on your feet!” ordered one of the men. He poked Wan hard with the barrel of his rifle.

The soldiers took the only two survivors of the *Orion*, Wan and Tonga, into their armored transports and made for their base. It was in the opposite direction of where Wan had watched the others go, which he considered a bonus. At least it meant there was a chance they weren’t dead. Wan didn’t hold out that hope for himself.

From the back of the armored transport, Wan watched as his burning ship shrank into the distance. He seethed. There was no bargaining with these bastards. Despite normally not being a confrontational man, he was feeling quite confrontational in that moment. His mind was made up. It was time to fight back. At most, he’d die and Tonga might die, but at that point, he didn’t give a shit.

You didn’t survive as long as Wan had without a few tricks up your sleeve. Literally. Embedded inside the right sleeve of his jacket was a set of lock picks. He slipped one down his forearm, into his waiting hand.

“I don’t know how the hell you got through that fascist blockade up there, but you’re gonna tell our captain exactly how you did. Understood, pirate? Then, if you’ll lucky we’ll just lock you up and not put you down like your friends.”

As Wan fiddled around covertly with his copper lock pick, he looked over at Tonga, who looked defeated, staring at the floor of the armored transport. That wouldn’t do. He needed his big islander to fight, injured or not. Maybe once the killing started, he’d help out.

The idea was to stick the copper lock pick in between the magnetic restraints, breaking the arc that kept them pinned together. Then his hands would be free to wreak havoc, something he hadn’t done in a very long time. Wan had really hoped he’d never have to kill another person before retiring on some paradise planet like Yelsin Prime or Turrander. But alas, the best laid plans of mice and men.

Wan successful broke the magnetic field between his restraints. He looked around to make sure none of the four soldiers in the armored transport were onto him. They gave no indication that they’d seen.

In his younger days, people had called him the “Golden Lion”. The first part came from his affinity for gaudy jewelry. The second came from his ferociousness as a fighter. In fact, he’d first bought the *Orion* with money won in the Battle Pits of Vassar-3. Well, mostly bought it. ‘Stole it with a generous donation’ was probably a fairer statement. Even so, Wan might be a lazy drunk now, but he’d been a gladiator once.

Wan’s first move was to get himself a weapon. His had been surrendered before his crew was slaughtered, but the AIC soldiers had plenty. He had his eyes on the sidearm of the nearest dumb murderous bastard who had no idea it was going to be his last day among the living.

Wan leaped across the transport, grabbed the weapon while it was still in the holster so the man couldn’t pull it out, and headbutted him hard in the face.

Wan saw stars himself, but he focused on keeping a grip on the weapon. As the man jerked back in pain, Wan yanked hard on the pistol, and it ripped free of the holster. Before the man understood what was happening, Wan blew a hole in his head. The soldier sitting opposite, shocked and slow to react, tried to swing his rifle over to shoot the pirate captain. But there wasn’t much room to maneuver the long muzzle, and there was even less time to react. Wan put a new hole in his face, too.

As if suddenly reactivated, Tonga lunged on the third soldier. Even injured, the pirate weapons specialist was a huge man and easily overpowered his foe. He grabbed him by the head with his good arm and kept banging it against the wall of the armored transport until his helmet broke, and his skull followed soon after.

Terrified, the fourth AIC soldier quickly climbed into the cockpit with the driver and closed the security door behind him. Wan and Tonga were left in the back with three dead bodies.

“Now what?” Tonga asked.

For a second they looked at each other, trying to figure out what to do. Then Wan grabbed one of the soldiers’ rifles and clambered up to the top hatch of the armored transport. He climbed up onto the roof of the moving transport. It took him a few seconds to gain his footing.

There was a decision to be made. From the top of the armored transport, Wan could see the second transport, just beside and ahead of their own. The arrangement was his first lucky break. It kept him just out of sight of the other pilot. Wan’s jacket flew behind him flapping in the wind as he made his decision.

He aimed at the cockpit of the second transport and opened fire. It took a couple of hits, because the glass protecting the driver was thick and tough. But the super-heated high-velocity bullets eventually hit their mark.

The second transport spun out of control. Then it tumbled end over end, undoubtedly killing or, at the very least, grievously injuring the soldiers inside. Wan reopened the hatch and stuck his head back inside the armored transport he was on top of.

“Whaddaya doing, big man? Get on up here!” ordered Wan.

“My arm,” complained Tonga.

“Your arm...Well, buddy, I’m about to shoot the driver of this vehicle. Either you get up here and jump off with me, or you take your chances inside this metal tube of death as it careens out of control. Take your time.” With that, Wan’s head disappeared from the open hatch.

Tonga cursed to himself, then went about trying to climb up and out the hatch. Wan helped him up to the roof. Then he immediately pushed his comrade off the vehicle.

The big man screamed some unpleasantries at Wan, but Wan ignored him. Tonga would live, probably. They were flying low, and the ground below was wet.

At any rate, Wan would join him soon enough. So if he sent Tonga to his death, he'd be following after him.

Wan made his way over to the front of the armored transport. He stood, trying to reach some semblance of balance, but the driver wasn't going to make it easy for him. Aware that their prisoner was on top of their vehicle, he swerved left and right, trying to knock him off, but Wan was sure-footed.

Once he noticed a brief pause in the swerving, Wan fired down at the roof of the armored transport's cockpit. *Armored transport* seemed to be a misnomer, at least at the point where the cockpit armor reached the front glass. When he saw that his bullets easily tore through, Wan jumped off and hoped for the best.

Tumbling in the dirt, Wan regretted his actions in the last few minutes. With each somersault came a new pain in a new part of his body. For a little bit, it felt like it was never going to end. Finally his tumbles came to a stop, and the pirate was staring up at the sky.

Wan had almost forgotten that there was a battle raging in space above Europa. He lay there for a second in the dirt, looking at the beautiful display of lights and death just outside the moon's atmosphere. Then he remembered the situation he was in.

When getting up, Wan remembered why he'd made a habit of avoiding fights. Everything hurt. He managed to fight through the pain and return to his feet.

The first thing Wan did was to walk up to the crashed armored transport he'd just escaped from. It was on its side, smoldering like his ship and pilot. Without even checking to see if anyone had survived, he emptied the remains of his rifle mag into the cockpit through the passenger side window. Then he threw away his rifle and jumped off.

"This is what I get for being diplomatic," muttered Wan to himself as he limped in the direction he'd seen Tonga fall.

A few minutes later, and he discovered the big man. Tonga was on his feet and looking angry. Wan figured he'd get punched in the face, but he was in too much pain and too tired to care. But Tonga must not have seen much sport in it, because he just shook his head.

"You couldn't have warned me?"

Wan shrugged. "It would've been worse if you'd known what was coming."

Tonga's broken arm hung at his side, as he'd lost the sling somewhere in his own tumbling. He was covered in black dirt, including the bandages on his head.

"We gotta get out of here before someone gets wise," Wan said. "Somebody was waiting on those transports, and we don't want to be here when they come looking for them."

"Where do we go?"

Wan, armed with a pistol, pointed the way back in the direction of the ship. "That way."

SIX

IT'S COMPLICATED

“THAT’S A HELL OF A STORY, PRIVATE,” said Werner as he sat on a swiveling chair in his little base’s improvised medical bay.

Ada sat across from Werner with a towel over her right shoulder, spotted with her own blood. She wasn’t leaking because she was hurt, though. The UEF army medic was removing and re-installing a new HUD implant. Doc Congo and Tomas had already gotten theirs done, because Ada insisted on going last so she could explain how she and her group found themselves on Europa.

“It’s the truth, Captain,” insisted Ada.

“Well to be honest, I didn’t buy it at first. Aliens and cultists, visions and shit like that, you can’t blame me.”

“But...?”

“But then again, I’ve often found the crazier the story, the less likely it is that the person telling it made it up. Especially after all the crazy shit I’ve seen on this godforsaken rock.” Werner leaned back in his chair.

What struck Ada as a bit odd was not only how Werner never took off his Kevlar and uniform, but how everyone on his base was dressed for a fight. She didn’t see a single soul in civvies.

It wasn’t just the soldiers at the UEF scout base being dressed for war that stood out. Ada could feel the atmosphere, and it was tense. Looking at the physical building itself and the walls surrounding it, there were scars of war. Bullet holes revealed steel rebar under thick concrete. Craters served as memorials of friends lost, for anyone stationed there. And there were shell casings everywhere. She figured that there were so many being spent so

often that they'd stopped trying to clean them up. Instead, they'd pushed them into huge clanging piles. The fighting must've been constant.

"Speaking of, what's going on here? Looks like you guys have been through it," commented Tomas. He stole the words straight out of Ada's mouth.

"That's because we have. We're the easternmost UEF post on Europa. Thirty, forty clicks out is the AIC's main base of ground operations. We're the first line of defense for each one of their pushes into our territory, and lately they've been stepping those up. We get hit every damn day," explained Werner.

"How? I mean, we just flew through your blockade. Don't see a lot of troop transports or warships making their way through there," said Ada.

"The blockade is new. Just got set up about a week ago. The higher-ups were scared after all contact was lost with Vassar-1. There were reports going around that we invaded their home planet, so naturally, we prepared for a counterassault here and then on Earth's moon as well."

"That also strangles the rebels that are already here. They can't get out, and no supplies or reinforcements can come in," pointed out Tomas.

"Exactly. But that's made them desperate, more dangerous. I've lost..." Werner stared off at nothing for a moment before returning back to the moment. "We've lost a lot of men and women in the last few days."

"I'm sorry to hear that, Captain. I really am. But despite all, that we need your help. We need to talk to whoever's in charge here, on Europa. They need to be warned about what's coming," insisted Ada.

"I assure you, they know that the AIC are coming. Hell, you just flew through the battle against them. Which I still want to know how you did, by the way."

"No, about the Shapeless." Ada gave Werner a look that asked if he'd listened to a word she said. She'd told him about the *Atlas*, Sanctuary Station-33, and Vassar-1. She'd warned him about the alien threat that threatened to eat the UEF from the inside out. But he was a military man. He believed and was ready to deal with what he knew. He knew war against the AIC. A strange shapeshifting alien that he never saw, or never knew of anyone who had any run-ins with one, was more abstract, harder to wrap his head around.

"I understand. I do. And I believe you about the ETs. But my responsibility is this base and the people here. We need *your* help. You stay

here and help us fight. You do that, I'll personally escort you back to HQ myself. Deal?"

Werner had already lost over forty men and women to the cold embrace of death or injury in the last month. Things were very bad.

"Okay," agreed Ada. "We can do that." She didn't consult Tomas on that decision, or Congo. The thing was, she didn't have to. Tomas, even after all they'd been through, was still a soldier. Like her, his loyalty to the UEF hadn't wavered even though loyalty to each other, the group, was more important. And the doc was just happy to not still be locked up in the incinerator with Clarissa and LeFay.

"Good! I'll see if we can get you set up with some armor and uniforms, if you want. Arm you. I have to go deal with your friends." Werner got up.

"What are you going to do with them?" asked Tomas.

Ada could feel the animosity radiating off Tomas. His loyalty was to the group, much more than to the UEF. If Werner told him that he wasn't going to let them go, or worse, no one in the scout base could stand between him and freeing them.

"Not sure yet. I get that they're your friends and that you've been through a lot. But they're both known AIC spies, agents. Just letting them go, it'd get me in a hell of a lot of trouble."

"It already looks like you're in a hell of a lot of trouble," Ada said. She wanted to get up, but the UEF medic was using the flesh fuser to close the incision on the side of her neck. "You said yourself that you need all the help you can get, and those two ladies, well, they can do more than help."

Werner sighed and nodded. "I know. Still..."

"What's the deal with you two, anyway?" asked Ada, genuinely curious. "You and LeFay."

LEFAY WAS BORN Sarah Diana Pavlic in the Russian Republic. She was born on Earth. But her parents, they were rebel sympathizers. When she was eight, they fled the planet and moved to Vassar-1. At the time, she'd thought it was a choice, but in actuality they'd run afoul of the Kremlin.

When they got there, they had nothing. They lived in the Bowery Slums for two years as LeFay's parents tried to scrape their family off the floor.

And they did. In those two years a young LeFay picked up an aptitude for computers and coding in particular.

LeFay got accepted into the United Institute of Computer and Bio Technology (UICBT) at only eleven years old. She was the youngest student accepted in the school's fifty-year history. Once she started, it became clear that she was special. Her university-aged fellow students couldn't keep up with her ideas and projects regarding a discovered love: biohacking.

One week after LeFay paid a friend to cut off her left arm at the elbow, and installed her own homemade version made from scraps and stolen bits of tech from UICBT, she was approached by an instructor and recruiter from the AIC's Intelligence Services. It wasn't long until she was whisked away to the outskirts of Vassar-1 to train to be a spy.

LeFay's abrasive yet nonchalant personality didn't do much to endear her to her fellow recruits and instructors. Add to that her love for hacking into the Intelligence Services servers, just for fun, and she didn't last long in the program. Once again, she found herself on the streets of the Bowery Slums.

With two parents too old to work full time, LeFay took it upon herself to take care of her family. She worked for different Aug Centers around Vassar-1, creating and installing different body augmentations for rich clients. On the side, she used the information she got from said clients' HUDs to steal credits that she paid to nurses to take care of her folks. Her other side hustle was a body hacking/augmentation service out of her own apartment that quickly gained popularity, due to the quality of her work.

One day, while in her shop/apartment, LeFay got an unexpected visitor. A fellow trainee from her time at the AIC Black Room, Clarissa, showed up at her doorstep. She offered LeFay another chance to work for the Intelligence Services. In return, the city sentinels wouldn't kick down her door, and Clarissa would get the Confederation Police to forget her many charges of digital robbery. To top it off, she offered government-paid in-home care for LeFay's parents. There was no choice but to accept.

LeFay's name changed when she entered secret training off-planet in a space-based training center called the Hive. The Hive was reserved for military and citizens of the AIC who showed exceptional skills and talents when it came to advanced technology. She quickly rose to the top in body hacking and augmentation.

Armed with military training and access to the AIC's most advanced technologies, LeFay was given her first assignment, on Earth. She actually flew there with Clarissa and Clarissa's family. Both put down roots in and around Seattle. LeFay was ordered to infiltrate the UEF equivalent of the Hive, situated under the megacity. Clarissa was assigned to a power plant.

LeFay was reassigned away from Seattle. She went back to her old habits and was stealing UEF tech, keeping the best for herself and handing the AIC Intelligence Services the scraps. Luckily she was caught by her own side, but couldn't be trusted around such valuable technology anymore. She wasn't there for the cultist terrorist attack on the power plant.

The next stop for LeFay was Annapolis. Her new assignment was to apply to be a UEF Phantom, one of a group of tech-savvy specialist spies whose whole purpose was to stay invisible and attack the enemy digitally. She excelled at the job. This time she curtailed her extracurricular activities and stayed on point. During that time she also met a man, a newly-graduated young Lieutenant Darren Werner, at a bar not far from the Government District.

LeFay was a hard woman. Of all the things that could've been said about her, no one would doubt her toughness, but she wasn't everyone's cup of tea. At that point she was more machine than woman: not just physically, but in her personality and emotions as well. The death of her parents made things worse. Werner didn't care about all that, though. He loved the mind that dwelt under the metal and wires. And she loved him.

"WHAT THE HELL happened between you two? You never told me," asked Clarissa as she lay on the floor of the incinerator, staring at the scorched ceiling.

"It was...complicated," answered LeFay as she pressed her hand against different parts of the incinerator walls. Though not visible, she was using a system of sound-wave emitters and echolocation receptors in her hand that would show her where the door panel on the other side was. She would've just hacked into the base's operating system, but the thick metal walls and door of the incinerator room made wireless connection impossible.

“That’s it? That’s all? C’mon, it’s not like we’re going anywhere anytime soon. Tell me,” urged Clarissa. She then turned to her side. “I don’t know, that’s what I’m trying to figure out.”

LeFay turned and looked at her friend, concerned. “For somebody who talks to her dead husband, you’re sure nosy about my ex-fiancé.”

“Stop trying to dodge the question. What happened?”

“We, uh...well, it was my fault. You know what I was doing there on Earth in Annapolis, right? As my ‘handler’?”

“You were supposed to gather as much information from the Phantom program as possible and relay it back. I remember.”

“Yeah, well, one day, we both had free days, me and Darren. I wanted to stay in bed while he was wide awake, so he decided he’d watch some TV on his HUD. But he wanted to watch something I had on file in mine. He asked, and I gave him access.”

“So? That sounds pretty innocent.”

“So, it turned out the night before I was a bit sloppy. We met for drinks after our shifts and I was running a bit late. I was so late and in such a hurry I forgot to encrypt my report for the AIC before leaving. I forgot to encrypt it while out drinking. I forgot to encrypt it while I was drunk. I forgot to encrypt it when I got home.”

“And you didn’t encrypt it in the morning?” Clarissa could see where this was going.

“Yup. Anyway, so he could get the show off my HUD, I gave him access. He stumbled upon the report, and you can guess what happened next.” LeFay went back to work emitting sound waves through the thick metal walls, looking for the door panel.

“Pretend I can’t. C’mon, it’s pretty damn boring in here.”

LeFay sighed. “He found the report, and we fought. I told him the truth about who I was and what was going on. He called off the engagement and gave me one day to get off-planet before he’d report me. That was the big issue. To him, the job was important than our relationship.”

Clarissa laughed.

“What’s so funny?” LeFay stopped and turned around, looked at her friend again.

“You! You say it like it was his fault.”

“The way I see it, it was. I mean, why couldn’t he just look past that and focus on the fact that we were, you know, in love?” LeFay ended the

sentence like a proclamation of love made her feel queasy.

“He’s in the military and you were a spy, spying on that military. How could he just ignore that? No wonder he’s still pissed.”

LeFay was silent for a moment. She went back to work; then she spoke up again. “I mean, it was more than just that.”

“What do you mean?” Intrigued, Clarissa sat up, propping the upper half of her body up by her elbows.

“I kind of, sort of might have been a bit angry after he broke up with me.”

“What’d you do?” Clarissa knew her friend well enough to know it couldn’t have been anything good.

“I might have drained his bank account, digitally erased his identity, and stolen his car, and sold it at the port before leaving the planet.”

“Jesus, Sarah.”

“LeFay. It’s LeFay. I haven’t been Sarah in a long time now.”

“No wonder he locked us in this incinerator.”

“Only for a little while. Give me five more minutes and I’ll have us out of here.”

“To go where? We’re in a UEF base. It’s not like they’re just going to let us walk out the front door.”

“Anywhere is better than here—” LeFay stopped because, through the viewing window, she saw Werner, Ada, Tomas, and the doc approaching. “We got company again.”

Clarissa sat up. “Be nice. Maybe he’ll forget your fuckery and let us out.”

“I hope he never forgets.” LeFay had to get the last word.

WERNER STOOD AT THE DOOR, staring through the window at LeFay’s face. “I have to tell you, Private, I’m a little hesitant to let them out.”

LeFay shot him a shit-eating grin.

“I know, but trust me, we need them,” Ada said. “LeFay, she’s like a one-woman army all in herself, and Clarissa is the best pilot and one of the

best fighters I've ever seen. They'll both be valuable and it's a waste not to use them."

"I trust you," Werner said. Then he pointed at LeFay. "But not her."

"We'll keep an eye on her. I promise."

"That's not enough." Werner walked over to the incinerator door. The two guards that stood their post outside of it folded over and stood behind him, rifles pointed forward. He took something out of his pocket as the doors slowly opened up. It looked like half of a ring.

"I knew you couldn't resist me, Darren," said LeFay, still smiling, arms open for a hug.

Werner responded by taking the half ring and putting it around one side of her neck. He pressed a button on it and the other half came swiping out, completing a collar around her neck. Then he took a couple of steps back.

"It's a restrictor ring. You won't be able to wirelessly communicate with any device, computer, anything."

Anger flashed for a moment in LeFay's face; then her features quieted and she shrugged like she'd expected it. "If you feel like this is what you have to do, then I guess—ow!" She'd tried to tug at it, but immediately got shocked.

"It's not coming off," Werner said.

After that there was no hiding her displeasure. "This is bullshit!" LeFay yanked at the collar and almost fell down from the electric shock.

"Either you wear the collar or you stay in the incinerator. Your choice."

"That works," answered Ada for LeFay. "Thank you, Captain. Now, where do you want us?"

SEVEN

THE ABYSS

BEN SAT on a cot in the cell on the *Veruvian* he shared with his father's stasis pod. He needed to figure a way out of this. He also needed to find a way to convince Rhule that they needed his help.

It was times like these that he regretted ever leaving the military. Sure, he had more freedom, and didn't have to worry about following orders or being sent out to war. But since he'd left, his life had been on the line plenty of times and he'd found himself in a jail cell on several different occasions. Now he was in one, looking at the body of his father.

The stasis pod floated a couple of feet off the floor. The top was clear thick plastic, pressurized so that no germs could get in or out of it. There was a padded bed big enough to fit a man up to six feet eight inches tall and four hundred pounds. Lee Saito had plenty of room. Any occupant was put into a state of stasis or hypersleep, normally reserved for long periods of space travel. In Lee's case it kept his vitals stabilized, as the wounds he suffered way back on Sanctuary Station-33, still hadn't healed. The Shapeless had only plugged them, not healed them.

Ben leaned over and put one hand on top of the plastic covering of his father's stasis pod.

"Are you still you?" he whispered.

As he looked at his dad's sleeping face through the different stats and vitals holographically projected on the cover, Ben wondered if Lee was dreaming. He wondered if his father, whenever he woke up, would be the man he remembered, or just a hollow thing.

LEE SAITO WAS ON A BEACH. He recognized this beach, and the small island that jutted out from the waves about a half a mile out into the chilly Pacific Ocean. His own father once took him to it when he was really young. It was one of his first memories. It was Shingo Beach, just outside Hamamatsu, Japan.

Lee felt and tasted the salty winds as they rolled off the ocean. He closed his eyes and took it in. It was so peaceful. Peace was something he hadn't known in such a long time.

Under his hands, Lee didn't feel the light coarse sand of Shingo Beach. He felt something hard, jagged, and even sharp. Upon looking down, he saw that he sat on a beach of human bones that stretched as far as he could see.

Lee wondered if he was still on the Shapeless' ship with a tendril attached to his forehead, being manipulated by the Pale Man. It sure seemed like it. Everything felt more like a memory than a dream to him, but things were clearly off.

When he looked out into the water, the island that jutted out of the waves was replaced with the carcass of Lee's baby, the UEF *Atlas*. He saw shapes peeking out of the ocean. They were human heads.

One by one, people from Lee's past slowly rose up out of the ocean, floating just inches above the wave crests. He recognized some. There was Jake Rollins, his friend and second in command. He saw Private. Baez, eyes a cloudy blue, bereft of life. He saw his former pilot, Admiral Chevenko's daughter. He saw the countless dead, people he'd lost under his command, cold water dripping off their bodies.

Lee stood up. It was a little hard at first, without sure footing underneath him, but he managed. He walked over to the water's edge.

There weren't current-beaten and smoothed rocks and pebbles at the water's edge. Instead, there were bullets. Bullets that shined, despite the sun being hidden behind clouds.

"You don't have to be here." Lee heard a voice. It echoed through the sky as if it came from God himself.

"Where else would I be?" asked Lee.

"Back in the real world, in the fight," answered the voice. Only this time it didn't come from the sky, but from behind the former captain.

Lee turned to see a small humanoid figure. Its skin was grey, hairless except for a couple of tufts on its chest. Though humanlike, there were a couple of things that made it clear it was alien. Its eyes were almond-shaped, and glowed yellow. Both of its legs were bent in the opposite direction at the knee, like a bird. And both of its arms ended in four-fingered hands, with webbing in between.

“I know you. How do I know you?” asked Lee. It was true. He felt the overwhelming sense that this being, this alien, was no stranger. “Are you one of them, a Shapeless thing?”

“Yes and no. I once was, when I was with you. But not anymore; he freed me, freed us,” answered the alien.

“Who?”

“Your son.”

“My...?” Lee had to take a second. At first he didn’t remember that he had a son, a wife. It was as if blanks on a page were filled in, bringing him closer to being himself again.

“Ben. He saved you as he saved me.”

“If he saved us, how are we here?”

“Where’s here? Have you asked yourself that?”

“I’m not...I don’t know. It’s the Shapeless; they made me relive my memories. That’s not what this is?”

The alien shook his head. “No, it’s not. Come, walk with me.” It held out its hand for Lee to take. He was hesitant. “Sorry. Perhaps a form that you’d find more comforting? Forgive me if I’m wrong, Lee Saito.”

Lee watched as the grey-skinned alien turned into the spitting image of his wife Beverly. She held out her hand for him to take. He did.

“You say you’re not the Shapeless, but you shapeshift like them,” pointed out Lee as he and Beverly began walking down the beach, hand in hand.

“I’m not. They took this from me, from us, from my people.” Beverly waved her arms around, indicating she was referring to the whole scene around them. “In return, I took their gift of changing their form. Another thing we owe your son.”

“If you aren’t Shapeless...” Lee looked down at his feet. The jagged bone had cut his bare feet up something fierce. But he didn’t feel any of it, and the blood didn’t bother him. “If you aren’t Shapeless, what are you? What do I call you?”

“We...your language doesn’t exactly have a word for what I am. In fact, language is still new to me.”

“Then how’d you get along, build a civilization?”

“There are other ways of communicating. Take us, for example. I don’t know if you noticed, Lee Saito, that neither of our lips have moved. I am literally reaching into your mind, accessing the speech section of your mind. I’m not even sure what I’m saying; I’m just conveying the ideas I have in my head, and it’s being automatically translated through our melding,” explained Beverly.

“Melding?”

“It’s what the Shapeless took from us. An ability shared by all my people, before they were annihilated.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

“About mind melding?”

“No, about your people.” Lee looked over at Beverly, surprised that she could make that mistake.

“Oh, right, of course. Sorry. Sometimes I forget to be sad. It was so long ago.”

“How’d it happen? How’d they wipe your kind out?”

“Simple, really; the same way it’s happening with yours. First there was a comet. Then out of that came a black oil. It had a mind of its own. Anything that came in contact with it became consumed by it. Either they died or their beings were completely taken over.

“At first no one really knew what happened. It hit someplace remote. Slowly they began to take over. Especially since they copied our mind melding, making it even harder to detect them.” Beverly didn’t seem particularly upset, either in tone of voice or on her face.

“You’re the only one left?”

“I’m the only one I know of that’s been freed.”

“And you say Ben did that? My Ben?”

“It’s the Herald Stone; he touched us with it. It’s made of the same thing as the comet. Once they are separated from it after landing on a planet, its very touch becomes deadly to them. They also use it to fuel their structures, vehicles, anything non-organic that they copy.”

“Where can we get more? How do we stop them?”

“I’m not entirely sure, Lee Saito. But I know how you can find out.” Beverly stopped. Lee kept walking, but was stopped by the alien in the form

of his dead wife, grabbing his hand.

“How?”

Beverly smiled and closed her eyes. Suddenly the beach and ocean in front of Lee disappeared. Water flowed off the end like a waterfall. He looked over the edge and saw nothing but open, cold, star-spotted space.

“By entering the Abyss, the Void. At least, that’s what the followers of the Shapeless call it.”

“I thought that was just death.”

“Yes and no. Death is just a transition to something more, to another life. Go ahead, jump.” Beverly held out her arm, inviting Lee to jump off the sandy cliff into the Abyss.

“You jump. I’m not jumping.”

“All of this is only as real as you believe it to be. You won’t die, as long as you believe you won’t. So jump with a strong mind, a strong heart, and find how to end this.” Beverly changed back to the original alien form.

Lee was hesitant. He looked over the edge again and tried to come to terms with what he was about to do. It felt like a crazy thing to do. After all he’d been through, though, jumping into the Abyss at the behest of a glowing yellow-eyed psychic alien with mind-melding powers seemed quaint.

“Why the hell don’t you jump first?”

The alien smiled. “I already did. That’s why I’m here.”

Lee stared at him stupidly. “You already...?”

“This is under *your* control,” the alien said, sticking a bony finger in his chest. “That is the mistake they made that you need to make them regret. Your willpower, Lee Saito. You will stop them once and for all.” The alien smiled confidently. “They chose the wrong soldier.”

Lee stood at the edge, facing the alien. He didn’t exactly share the alien’s confidence, but he returned the smile, and it felt good. Maybe the alien was right. It was the first time he’d smiled in God knew how long.

“You’re goddamn right they did,” Lee said. Then he closed his eyes and fell backwards off the cliff.

LEE FELL for what seemed like a good fifteen minutes before his body stopped. It floated in space, not touched by the cold or the pressures of the great beyond. In fact, quite the opposite: he was warm, felt like he was being hugged.

At first it appeared that Lee was just in empty space, that there was nothing there but infinity. As he gained his bearings, though, Lee started to think about where he wanted to go, what he wanted to see. With his mind, he called out into the darkness for anyone who knew anything about when the Shapeless first encountered human beings. Where did the comet hit? What planet?

A planet appeared out of nowhere, just in the distance from Lee. At first he didn't recognize it. If humanity's expansion into space had taught the former captain anything, it was that the universe is home to a hell of a lot of planets. Most weren't Goldilocks rocks, but even those that weren't were aggressively terraformed if they harbored valuable minerals and resources. The reddish-orange tint of the planet in the distance told him that it was most likely one of those.

Suddenly Lee flew towards the planet at high speeds. Or perhaps it was the opposite; it was hard to tell in this place. Before he knew it, he was standing on the surface of an alien planet, his feet still bare, reddish-orange dusty dirt between his toes.

Lee looked around. At first all he saw was a beautiful but lifeless desertscape. Only rocky outcrops disturbed the vast flatness. Then he saw a mining facility with several little settler buildings nearby that he figured housed quarters for workers and their families.

As he walked towards the mining facilities, Lee wondered why the Abyss had brought him here. And if it was where those killed and/or absorbed by the Shapeless were sent, where were all the others? Why did it feel so barren?

Urged by an unseen force, Lee looked up into the sky. He saw something screaming through the sky, still aflame from its entry into the atmosphere. It was a shooting, no, a falling star. That was what he was looking for. His willpower fueled him to chase it.

Lee's body suddenly flew forward at impossible speeds. Naturally he was a bit scared when he saw that he was flying forward straight towards the mining facility. But instead of colliding with it, he flew straight through. His body was without mass, without a solid state in those moments.

When Lee's body stopped flying forward, he saw the falling star hit the dry lifeless dunes. A big cloud of reddish-orange sand and dust kicked up along with the fires from the explosive landing. It was surreal seeing and hearing sand turn to glass in midair.

Lee admired the beauty of the natural-made glass sculpture as he approached it. In the middle of this shining, fragile crater was a still-smoking black rock: obsidian. This was it. The former captain knew this was the Herald Stone that his alien friend had talked of.

"What is that?" Lee turned and saw a woman sitting in her rover, driver's side door open. She stepped out in her full spacesuit to get a closer look.

"Looks like some sort of comet. Is this what comets look like?" A man got out of the other side of the rover.

"Not sure, but it's a big bastard, isn't it?" The woman stepped on the glass that broke underfoot. She withdrew her foot and looked at the Herald Stone. It was indeed big, about the size of a car.

Lee noticed, but the poor hapless settlers didn't, when the black oil-like ooze started to silently pour out of the porous Herald Stone. He didn't want to watch anymore. He knew what came next. But before he departed the desert planet, he needed to know where and what this planet was.

"Archeon." Lee heard a familiar voice. On instinct, he looked up at the top of a rock outcropping. Standing there was Jake Rollins, armed with a friendly smile. In the blink of his eye, Lee was standing next to him, looking down on the Herald Stone and the settlers being overcome by the oily black liquid.

"Jake," greeted Lee.

"Captain," greeted Rollins. "I'm surprised to see you here. Especially since you're not dead."

"Not yet."

Rollins nodded his head. "Not yet."

"This is you, right? The real you, not...you're not that alien again, are you?"

"I'm the only me I know."

"Yeah, but...?"

"It's part of me. The rest is rotting somewhere out there in space. Like the others." Rollins looked a lot like how Lee remembered, only better. For

starters, he had both his hands, and there wasn't a sign of struggle or strife or fighting on his body or uniform. He was pristine.

"This place. You said it's called Archeon?"

"It is, or was. This mining facility, these people, they're all gone."

"Where is Archeon? I've never heard of it."

"For good reason," explained Rollins. "It's a remote planet, out on the edge of AIC space. It's not strategically important, so I'm not surprised it was never on your radar."

"But it is strategically important. Not against the AIC; that fight doesn't matter anymore. It's important to our fight against the Shapeless. If they're vulnerable to the Herald Stone, that's the biggest one I ever saw. We need it."

"You do," agreed Rollins. "But first..." He stepped off the rocky outcropping, in the opposite direction of the Herald Stone.

Lee followed Rollins off the rocky outcropping and back out into the desert. In the near distance he saw a door standing alone in the middle of the wastes. It was the same kind of pressurized door that could be found on a dreadnought like the *Atlas*.

"Where are we going?" asked Lee.

"To see where you need to go next," answered Rollins. Lee was starting to get a bit annoyed at all the vague answers he'd been getting since the alien met him on the beach, but he bit his tongue.

"And that's through here?" Lee stood in front of the door. He touched it. It was hot from being under the Archeon sun for who knew how long.

"It is. Among other things. Unfortunately, this is where I have to leave you." Rollins held out his hand for Lee to shake.

"Really? You can't come with? Why not?"

"What's through that door isn't for me. It's not a concern for the dead."

"But..." Lee looked down at the sand. After raking his mind to come up with a good argument to convince Rollins to come with, he realized that this version of his longtime friend wasn't created by his own mind. This was what was left of Rollins, the energy that goes on after you die, and he deserved peace.

Lee shook Rollins' hand. "You were—are—a great friend, Jake. The best second I've ever had, and there's no one I would rather have covering my back. I don't think there ever will be."

Rollins smiled; it was warm, genuine. “And you were a great friend and an even better captain. It was a true honor to serve under you, sir.”

“Lee. None of this ‘Captain’ nonsense anymore. Do you see any stars or bars?”

“Sure I do. It’s who you are, burned onto your soul.”

“I failed you. I failed all of you. It’s why you’re here and not home with your family. Why don’t you hate me?”

“How could I hate you? You did the best you could, saved as many lives as you could. Considering the circumstances, I don’t think anyone could have done better.”

“Kind words, my friend, but hollow ones. The fact of that matter is that my decisions led to you being here, in the Abyss.”

“I would say that we forgive you, but there’s nothing to forgive. You don’t have to trust me, though. Ask them.” Behind Rollins, more people began to appear, like mirages coming into focus. It was the crew of the *Atlas*, all of them smiling, happy.

Lee couldn’t stop himself. His vision blurred. The guilt of his actions had been weighing on him.

“We all know you did your best.” Rollins placed one arm around Lee’s shoulder. “Because of what you are, deep down, in your soul.”

“And what’s that?”

“A hero. Don’t ever forget that.” With that, Rollins faded away. The other dead *Atlas* crew members followed, waving their hands as if to say their final goodbyes to their beloved captain.

Lee stood there for a moment. He wiped his eyes and nose, and was shaking. He shook because of the flood of emotion, something he was never good at dealing with, that had just crashed over him. In fact, he was so overwhelmed that he had to brace himself on the weird out-of-place door.

Once Lee got hold of himself, he took a deep breath and opened the door. It opened to more open space, with a metal walkway that extended out for what looked like miles. Curious to know what was next in this strange place, this Abyss, he entered.

Immediately upon entering, the door closed behind Lee. When he started walking forward, he noticed the metal walkway kept stretching forward as if to compensate. None of that mattered to him. What caught his attention was what was underneath him.

Lee looked down, through and past the grated metal walkway under his feet. There he saw a vast lake of black oily liquid. It was the same ooze that the Shapeless came in. Or was it their true form?

As he kept walking, it became clear to Lee that the lake of oil wouldn't end. It just kept going and going. Different, seemingly random parts of the lake started to bubble up. Out of those bubbles emerged dripping projectiles, fired up into space.

"Stop," ordered Lee as one of the projectiles was about to fly right by his face. And indeed, it stopped.

When the oil dripped off the projectiles that shot out of the lake, it became clear what they were. They were Herald Stones. That's when Lee realized what he was looking at, what was underneath him.

Using his mind, his will, Lee pushed the lake so far back that the planet it was based on became clear. Small, about the size of Earth's moon, completely covered in an ocean of black oil, the former captain knew he was looking at the Shapeless' home planet. His only question was...

"Where?" asked Lee. Suddenly the Shapeless planet flew into the distance. More and more planets passed by, and he realized that he was zooming out from there to where his physical body—his real body—was now. He traced the pathway in his mind, and it was crystal clear. Somehow, he knew now where the Shapeless' home planet was.

"Lee?" Lee saw Beverly suddenly appear on the metal walkway in front of him. She looked just as she did the day he fell in love with her: clad in a flower-print sundress.

"Beverly, is that you? Or are you that alien again?"

Beverly got close to Lee, so close their torsos touched. He breathed in and smelled her lavender perfume. That familiar warm feeling of affection ran through his body as he pressed his cheek against hers.

"What do you think? I'm so happy to see you, baby. But afraid of what that means," Beverly said to Lee as she caressed his back.

"What?"

"If you're here with me, doesn't that mean you're dead?" asked Beverly, still embracing her husband.

"I'm not dead, honey. And unfortunately, I can't stay."

"No, stay here, with me. It's so beautiful here, but it's also so lonely. I miss you. I miss our son."

“I’m sorry. Really, you have no idea how sorry I am, about so many things. But I can’t stay. I’ve got work to do, out there, in the living world.”

Lee yelled out in pain as he felt Beverly’s fingers literally dig under his skin, stopping him from breaking their formerly loving embrace. He tried pushing her away, but her grip was tight and was only tightening. It was clear to him that this wasn’t his wife.

“Let me go!”

“No! I once offered you a life with your family, but you turned us down. Now, I’m not giving you a choice. You’re going to stay here indefinitely, Mr. Saito.” Beverly’s voice changed to something cold, emotionless, sociopathic. Lee knew who he was dealing with. It was the Pale Man. It wasn’t dead.

“You can’t keep me here,” retorted Lee calmly. With a newfound confidence in his ability to manipulate the Abyss, he used one hand to push the Pale Man off of him. To his and the monster’s surprise, it was easy. “You can’t stop me.”

“We offered you heaven, paradise!” yelled the now irate Pale Man. The surroundings around the two started to twist and spin as tensions rose.

“You offered lies. Here’s my counteroffer. Run, hide, because I’m coming for you, and there’s nothing you can do to stop me. We’re done here,” said Lee.

BEN HAD BEEN in the brig for several hours. He was getting tired. It’d been awhile since he’d had some real sleep. After pulling his hand back off his father’s stasis pod, he lay down on the cell cot and sighed.

Just as his eyes were starting to close, Ben heard a weird banging noise. At first he wrote it off as the natural moans and groans of a ship that size. The metal expanded and contracted as internal heating fought against the cold of space. Then he heard another bang. This time it was louder, stronger, closer.

Ben almost fell out of his cot as a third bang came with the sound of the plastic top of the stasis pod hitting the cell floor. He looked over to see his father sitting up straight.

“Dad?”

EIGHT

THE BATTLE OF EUROPA, PART DEUX

“DO you think he’s still mad at me?” LeFay asked sarcastically as she stood with Clarissa on the walls around what they’d been told was Scout Base 11. The two of them had been assigned the farthest point out, meaning they’d be the first to contact any incoming enemies. Ada and Tomas were on the innermost wall. Congo was somewhere in the complex, helping with triage.

“Seems like it,” Clarissa said, spitting out a stim straw and sticking another in her mouth. All the soldiers here had them. LeFay hadn’t taken any when they were offered. She said she didn’t see the point. She’d prefer to fall asleep.

“Could be worse,” she said.

“Seriously,” Clarissa sighed. “You need to shut up.” She checked her rifle to make sure her suspicions of receiving the worst weapons in the UEF’s armory weren’t true.

“At least we’ll get first shot at them.”

“At who? Our own people?” It’s the AIC coming here, not the Shapeless.”

““Our own people”? They were never my people. Just because I lived there doesn’t mean I owe them anything. Besides, they sure as hell aren’t gonna hesitate to shoot *your* pretty ass. Better believe that.”

“I know. Doesn’t mean I have to like—” Clarissa looked up from her gun and saw a dark shape on the horizon. “What’s that?”

“Looks like the party’s starting a little early.” LeFay slapped her rifle shut and chambered a round.

“Is it UEF or AIC?” The vehicle was so far away it was hard for Clarissa to tell.

“Let’s just assume it’s AIC and blow it up.”

Clarissa looked over at her friend incredulously.

“What?” LeFay shrugged. “I have a little aggression I need to work out.”

Things got a little more complicated as LeFay and Clarissa saw that the first vehicle was being chased by a fighter ship. The ship flew low, firing its cannon, trying to disable or destroy its prey.

Alarms went off on the base as the soldiers saw the two approaching vehicles. Men suddenly started populating the walls, rifles and rocket launchers at the ready.

“Wait...” LeFay had a feeling that something wasn’t right. She couldn’t reach out wirelessly and access cameras inside the vehicles or their IDs because of the restrictor ring around her neck. But she saw the decals on the first vessel, the one being chased. It was an AIC armored personal transport.

“Why are they chasing one of their own transports?” asked Clarissa.

“Contact Darren. Tell his men to let the transport through and shoot down that fighter.” LeFay’s eyes had already zoomed in on the armored personal carrier. Through the front windshield, she saw Tonga behind the wheel. And as if that wasn’t confirmation enough, Wan had emerged from the hatch on top and was firing at the fighter.

“Holy... is that Wan?” Clarissa couldn’t believe it.

“Damn right it is. Call him!”

“HUD, call Werner.” Clarissa stepped away from the wall.

“Don’t say I never did anything for you, Darren.” LeFay lifted up and aimed her rifle. The computers in her head compensated for wind, distance and velocity. Once she was confident that everything was lined up, she squeezed off two rounds.

“Make it fast!” Werner snapped to Clarissa.

“That transport has friendlies in it. We need to let them in.”

“That’s not happening.”

“They’re our crew,” said Clarissa.

“Not my problem. These doors don’t open up for spies or pirates or whoever is in that APC. Sorry, but I can’t do it.”

LeFay’s two piercing rounds hit their mark. Both bore holes through the engine and caused a fatal mechanical complication. The fighter immediately spun out of control, but the pilot clearly wanted to go down

fighting as its cannons shot wildly on its way down to the black soil. A couple of rounds hit the back of the APC and knocked out its navigation.

The APC came to a screeching stop, losing its magnetic engines, sending it into the soil. That fighter that was following it hit the ground harder and tumbled. It rolled up and over the APC and dragged to a stop just short of the base walls.

“Hold your fire!” yelled LeFay, even though the soldiers had no reason to listen to her orders.

Everyone on the walls watched as a flamboyantly-dressed middle-aged Chinese pirate clawed his way out the top of the APC. His head had taken a hit in the crash; a little blood trickled down from his receding hairline. He waved at the base, yelled something that no one heard. Then, without wasting any more time, he reached into the hatch he’d just climbed out of and helped Tonga up and out as well.

“Who is this?” asked Werner, but not through his HUD.

LeFay and Clarissa turned in surprise. They were both so concentrated on the shitshow going on outside the walls that neither noticed the commanding officer had joined them.

“That’s uh, well,” LeFay struggled to answer. “That’s Captain Wan.”

“Daison Wan? That crazy asshole that calls himself the Golden Lion? He’s still alive?”

“He’s still alive.” LeFay glanced at Clarissa. “Though to be fair, he doesn’t really call himself that anymore.”

Just then, Wan’s screams wafted up on the breeze from below. “The Golden Lion demands you open the gates!”

LeFay cringed. “Not that much.”

Werner shook his head. “Unbelievable.” He looked over the wall and then back at LeFay. “What the hell is he doing here? And why were the AIC so determined to take him out?”

“I think the answer to your question isn’t far behind him,” said Clarissa. She was looking in her HUD at a satellite view of the open field outside the base. From what she saw, there was a healthy-sized force not minutes away.

“What do you...” Werner looked through his HUD. He saw the same thing Clarissa did, though he was a bit more concerned. If his eyes weren’t deceiving him, there were three or four times his number on their way. He gritted his teeth. “Damn.”

LeFay whistled. “I guess our friend the pirate captain brought the fight with him.”

“Is this some kind of joke to you?” Werner bit off.

LeFay watched as Wan and Tonga hurried as fast as they could, limping towards the wall they were stationed on, waving an improvised white flag. “You need to open the gates, let them in.”

“Not happening. Those gates stay shut and fortified. Sorry, Sarah, but my concern is my men and women, not your rogues’ gallery.” Werner rested his rifle on top the wall and knelt down in a firing position. “Hope you two are ready.”

As Werner prepared to lay his life on the line fighting rebels on Jupiter’s moon, LeFay and Clarissa racked their minds trying to think of a way to help their friends up onto and over the walls. Neither of them came up with a viable idea. Turned out only the dead knew what to do.

“What’s that?” Clarissa looked past LeFay at seemingly nothing.

LeFay followed her gaze. “I don’t see anything.” She paused at the horizon. “Except holy *hell*, that’s a lot of incoming trouble.”

She turned back to Clarissa, but now she was looking to her right, seemingly speaking to someone who wasn’t there.

“Invisible Blake got some ideas for us?” LeFay asked.

Clarissa looked back at her and blinked. “Cables.”

LeFay raised her eyebrows. “Could he maybe be more specific?”

CLARISSA SAW what Blake was talking about.

There was a trio of cables hanging off the wall that were being used to hoist up different supplies like ammunition or water. It looked like something enterprising lazy men would do so they wouldn’t have to climb down.

“There,” Clarissa said as she rushed over to one of the cables with nothing attached. She took out her knife and started cutting. The going was rough at first, since it was metal cable, but her knife was sharp and her determination patient.

“You and that dead hubby of yours,” LeFay said.

She didn't understand, because she'd never been touched by the melding from the Shapeless like Clarissa. She didn't understand that once connected to the Abyss, you were always connected to the Abyss. But to be fair, neither did Clarissa.

"You gonna help me or what?" Clarissa struggled to pull up the heavy severed steel cable by herself. "Some of us don't have an augmented body."

LeFay lifted the cable up with ease, then used her strength to tie it around a hook in the wall. She had no clue about the original purpose of the hook, nor did she question it. The cable was then thrown over the other side of the wall for Wan and Tonga to climb.

"Are you kidding me?" Werner took a moment from relaying orders through his HUD. "You literally just gave anyone on the other side of the wall a way to climb up them."

"Relax, Dare," LeFay said nonchalantly. "We'll cut it down once they get up here."

"Or we just cut it now and screw the two bastards down there."

"Or I shoot you right now and see if your second in command is more reasonable."

LeFay gave Werner a death stare as Clarissa continued to do all she could to help Wan and Tonga. She waved her arms in the air, trying to get their attention.

WAN RAN AS FAST as his banged-up body would let him. Tonga was close behind. He looked back, and past his weapons expert he saw a quickly-approaching legion of AIC soldiers, complete with their own APCs, three spider tanks and a war cannon.

Part of Wan figured he might as well stop and die without winding himself. If he was going to be killed, why not do so with air in his lungs, sitting on the ground? But the prouder part of his ego urged him to keep going. A lion didn't die sitting on its ass. Hell, a Golden Lion never dies.

The AIC war cannon was a vehicle manned by two people. One drove the artillery on wheels. The second was in charge of aiming and firing the huge cannon, loaded with high explosives charges meant to demolish buildings. Or in this case, walls.

The ground beneath Wan and Tonga's feet shook as the AIC war cannon fired. Wan watched as a burning projectile went flying over his head. The explosive projectile flew over the trio of walls, landing just beyond the innermost one. The concussive force made all three walls quiver and sent men flying.

"WE NEED to take out that war cannon," Werner growled to one of his lieutenants. "That almost took out the central facility in one shot."

"Mortars!" screamed the man next to him.

Quick as that, a half-dozen soldiers emerged from one of the smaller buildings linked to the central structure. They placed several small four-foot-long tubes on the ground. Four automatic drill screws dug into the ground, anchoring them. In a matter of thirty seconds or so, the weapons were set up and started firing.

The mortar rounds were designed to explode about fifteen or twenty feet above the ground. From this initial round, a flurry of about one hundred small explosives was sent out in every direction, demolishing everything and everyone unlucky enough to be in its blast radius.

"Get them firing!" screamed Werner at almost the same time that the first mortars were sent airborne.

He watched intently to make sure the mortar rounds hit their mark. Even with assistance and coordination with satellites, the first volley just missed the war cannon but did manage to take out one of the APCs, though the troops inside simply got out and continued on foot.

"Reload before they get a better bead on us," ordered Werner through his HUD, but he knew the odds were slim that the next shot from the war cannon was off-target. They'd had their shot and missed.

WAN AND TONGA finally reached the outermost wall of the base. The pirate captain insisted that Tonga go first. With only one arm it was going to be hard, if not impossible.

“A little help!” yelled Wan, barely heard over the sound of the mortars firing again and the opposing war cannon trying to home in on the walls.

Tonga grabbed the cable. He wrapped it around his good arm. LeFay stood on the edge of the walls and grabbed the other end of the anchored cable. Then she pulled up. The large Tongan, easily six foot five or six, ascended quickly with her powerful help.

Quickly, but not quickly enough.

The next war cannon projectile hit the outermost wall only a few feet away from Tonga. Wan was thrown sideways, flying through the air like a ragdoll. It took a second for him to get his bearings. When he did and looked back to where Tonga had been, the wall was gone.

Wan looked around for Tonga on the ground, but he was simply gone, blown to pieces by the concussive blast and the pieces of concrete that came with it.

Wan wiped concrete and dirt and ash from his face as she stood.

“At least I don’t have to climb up the wall,” he murmured as he clambered through the ragged hole.

He saw Clarissa and LeFay lying on the dirt beyond the wall. They hadn’t taken a direct hit, but they’d been thrown well clear by the blast. Both were moving, though neither looked like they were exactly all there.

Then he heard a voice to his right. He looked down and saw a UEF officer with a deep scowl and plenty of rank. Wan figured this must be a commanding officer of some kind.

“Auth code Alpha Niner Echo Wind,” the man screamed, relaying orders through his HUD, Wan realized. He wondered how the man could hear anything. Wan’s ears were still ringing. “This is Werner. I need air support, Vector 322. Repeat, I need immediate air support, Vector 322.”

Wan moved beyond the officer to stand over LeFay. He held his hand out. In that moment he did hate her. Because of her and the favor she’d asked of him, he’d lost everything. But in this moment, he was more concerned with surviving than with having it out with her.

LeFay took Wan’s hand, and he pulled her up. “Nice necklace,” he said as he saw the restrictor ring around her neck.

“Haha,” LeFay said.

“You got super ears that don’t ring, too?” Wan asked, half-joking. But LeFay nodded. Of course she did.

“Eardrums were replaced by superior synthetics years ago,” she said smugly.

“Looks like your friend isn’t as lucky,” Wan managed. He pointed at Clarissa.

LeFay helped her to her feet. “What’s the damage?” she asked.

“I can’t hear a damn thing,” Clarissa screamed at LeFay. “And I twisted my damn ankle,” she said, pointing at the knot that was already ballooning around her ankle. “But other than, never better.”

LeFay looked around. “Tonga?”

Wan shook his head sadly. LeFay just frowned. “Where’s Werner?”

Wan raised his eyebrows. “Hey, I know that one.” He pointed to the UEF officer on the ground near the base of the wall, screaming commands. “He’s ordering air support.”

“Little late for that,” LeFay said bitterly as they rushed over to join him. At least where he was situated, there was a little cover, though it was going to be useless soon.

“Target the damn cannon!” yelled Werner.

“I second that,” LeFay said behind him.

“I’m not getting a good signal through to the main Europa base.”

Wan scanned the sky. “They’re probably jamming. And all this airborne debris isn’t helping.”

The mortars kept firing, and they kept missing the war cannon. Instead they did little damage to the approaching forces, shielded by their APCs and spider tanks. Speaking of the tank, they’d gotten close enough that they’d stopped hovering over the ground. Their name came from the legs that sprouted out of the sides and dug into the Europa dirt. With them, they could very well climb over the walls or any obstacles they wished. Armed with cannons and plenty of guns, the three spider tanks were just as much of an immediate threat as the war cannon.

To make matters worse, two AIC bombers came screaming out from behind the ground forces. The triangular ships had very clear targets. They were aiming for the mortar squads and any anti-air ordnance the base housed.

“I know I wanted in here,” Wan said, “but I’m rethinking that decision now.”

ADA TOOK in the carnage around her. Mortars fired as she saw and heard the anguish of dying soldiers, hit by the war cannon's ridiculous projectiles. She watched as Congo and several UEF medics ran around, desperately trying to save lives or at least help some end peacefully, without pain. And the Swedish former Marine felt helpless. She hadn't felt that way in so long it truly tore at her soul.

Upon hearing and seeing AIC bombers approaching, Ada had a good idea what their target was. She tried to get the mortar crews' attention, but everything was too loud, too chaotic for them to hear her, so she did all she could. She grabbed Tomas by his arm and dragged him into cover with her.

Everything shook and felt like an earthquake as Ada and Tomas huddled down in the fetal position. AIC bombs fell on the mortar crews, nearly vaporizing them instantly. Several more hit the base proper, gauging out huge chunks of the thick reinforced-concrete roof of the central structure.

Ada knew what she had to do. Those bombers needed to be taken out, or else they'd circle around and come right back. They'd keep doing that until their payload was exhausted, which meant they'd return to base, re-arm, and start the process all over again. She wasn't going to allow that. Neither was Tomas.

"We need to get to those AA guns," said Ada as she pointed to two anti-air cannons that the bombers must not have seen. But they were situated on the middle wall, between the outer and inner. Only a rough system of wooden boards connected the two walls. They had to traverse those if they were going to fight back.

"Why not? Of course we do. I'll go first." Tomas kept popping his head up over the walls to make sure the coast was clear. It wasn't. Chances were it was good as it was going to be, and those bombers would be back for another run before they knew it.

Tomas stood up and ran towards the rough system of wooden boards that joined the three walls outside the scout base. Ada followed close after. They were scared, sure, but more than anything, they rode their internal super speedways of adrenaline, tapping into the powerful natural chemical to pull them through and ignore the insane amount of danger involved in what they were attempting.

It was either that or sit around and do nothing, and Ada refused to accept fate that way. In her experience, there was little advantage in waiting

for trouble. It would find you in the end, and she'd much rather be the one doing the attacking.

THE SPIDER TANKS got close enough for their cannons to be effective. They aimed for the outer walls; huge shells zipped over LeFay, Clarissa and Werner's heads. LeFay realized that if they didn't move or fight back, those tanks were going to be the end of them. Either they'd aim at them and take them out deliberately, or they'd simply step on them. Something had to be done, and she was the only one crazy enough to do it.

"Take off this damn restrictor ring!" yelled LeFay as she looked straight at Werner, as pieces of the outer walls blew off and fell all around them.

"Can't do that. I don't trust you, Sarah!" yelled back Werner. He peeked over the concrete roadblock they hid behind, only to see that the spider tanks were maybe only a couple of minutes away.

"Remove the damn ring! Or do you want to die right here, right now? Because those tanks ain't stopping!" It was rare that LeFay ever said anything that didn't drip in sarcasm or snark. But here, facing sure death, she was deadly serious.

"We need her," added Clarissa. "We can't take those out by ourselves."

Werner thought about it for a second. He heard another loud boom from the AIC war cannon. From the sound of it, its massive ball had hit the second middle wall. After weighing his options, he realized he had none. All he could do was set LeFay loose on them and hope the air strikes he called in arrived sooner rather than later.

"Fine! C'mere." Werner beckoned LeFay close. He pressed his finger against a scanner on top of the button that both locked and released the restrictor ring. It beeped, then released, falling to the black dirt.

LeFay smiled, then pulled in Werner for a passionate kiss that took everyone, especially Werner, by surprise.

LeFay broke free without another word, leaving Werner speechless, and turned to Wan. "Sorry about everything."

Wan was no dummy. He knew what was going on. The sad look in his eye told her that he knew he'd never see LeFay again, at least not alive. He nodded his head. "I still hate you."

“Fair enough.”

LeFay turned to Clarissa. “Tell Ada, Ben, and Tomas that I’m sorry I couldn’t make it to the finish line. Stay safe, Claire.” LeFay then kissed Clarissa.

“What are you talking about?” Clarissa asked in confusion. “This is crazy—”

“Tell Blake I’ll see him soon. Him and the girls.”

With that, armed with a rifle, some grenades, and a pistol, LeFay burst out from behind the jagged concrete wall, rushing forward with the base at her back, with nothing to hide behind but the wind.

The first thing LeFay did was hold out one arm as she ran straight towards the three AIC spider tanks. Her lethal little drone, Pete, emerged.

“Go on, bud. It’s been real,” ordered LeFay as Pete shot up out of her forearm and flew erratically at first. Then it flew into the barrel of one of the tanks’ cannon. Seconds later the obedient little robot self-destructed, rendering the weapon unusable.

As she ran towards the AIC spider tanks, LeFay hacked into one of them. The driver inside panicked as all his systems went haywire as she slowly took them over. That left one tank without a cannon, but with plenty of guns and a fully intact tank as well.

The spider tank with the busted cannon trained all of its guns at LeFay. She pushed her legs to one hundred and fifty percent more than what was stable, hoping they wouldn’t just blow apart underneath her as she ran a circle around the lumbering armored behemoths. As bullets hit the dirt just feet behind her, LeFay scanned the machines for any weak points. She found one.

AIC spider tanks had thick armor, meant to withstand any handheld ground weapons, mortar strikes, and even low-level missile strikes. Their purpose was to bulldoze any obstacles so that foot soldiers could follow close behind. But their engineers had a problem. There was one part of their mechanical anatomy that couldn’t be heavily armored in fear of hampering maneuverability. That weak point? Where the machine’s legs connected to its torso: its joints.

LeFay fired at the cannon-less spider tank’s joints as she ran. Though not heavily armored, they could withstand high-speed super-heated rounds from a rifle. So she threw the useless gun away and took out her pistol-sized

grenade launcher. Firing that while running was hard, but aided by the computers in her head and body she was able to—

Something ripped through LeFay's shoulder. She didn't feel it, but her HUD made damn sure she knew about the damage. Since it wasn't her good arm, she ignored it and fired her grenade launcher twice, hitting the partially disabled spider tank right at the joints.

Almost immediately, the spider tank with the disabled cannon went down front-first in the dirt. Its driver tried to get the behemoth back to its feet, but without its front two legs, it was nearly impossible. LeFay felt the second bullet hitting her in her back.

LeFay was running so fast that when she went down she tumbled and rolled in the dirt, not stopping until she hit the husk of a long-downed fighter ship. She'd been shot twice. Her left arm was hanging off her body. But she wasn't dead.

"I'm not dead!" she screamed into the sky.

As long as she wasn't dead, she was going to keep fighting for no other reason than to damn the universe. The door to death might be hanging open, but she wasn't ready to run through it just yet.

ADA TRIED her best to keep her balance on the thin wooden boards that connected the UEF scout base's walls, but it was hard. Bullets were flying everywhere as AIC ground troops got closer, running in between the legs of their remaining operational spider tank towards the hole their artillery had blown in the outer wall.

It wasn't just dodging bullets Ada had to worry about. The war cannon was still firing gigantic projectiles, threatening to topple the base's now-meager defenses. Their bombers had returned and blown a hole in the only building's roof so big that half of it collapsed on itself, killing an untold number of UEF troops.

Tomas looked back to make sure that Ada was still behind him. She was, though she was close to falling off the board. When he reached the other side, he held out his hand for her to grab. A trash can-sized piece of concrete and rebar that flew off the second wall after it got hit by a war cannon ball landed just behind her on the board, snapping it in two.

Ada fell to the ground below, just barely managing to twist her body enough not to break or sprain any limb. But she was just getting over grievous internal injuries that were no doubt agitated by the fall.

“Ada! You okay?” Tomas stood and looked down over the edge of the middle wall.

“I’m fine!” Ada yelled back. She clearly wasn’t, but she could move, and she could keep fighting, so in a way, she was. “Get to those AA guns before they come back!”

Tomas wanted to help Ada back up. But there was no ladder or anything that led back up for obvious reasons, and there was no time to think of an alternative. Those bombers were the biggest threat at the moment, and if he didn’t take them out, a lot more UEF soldiers were going to die.

“Go!” urged Ada as she got back up to her feet.

Tomas swallowed his guilt for leaving his friend behind and ran towards the nearest anti-air gun. Once he reached it, he couldn’t help but take a moment to look out on the battlefield. Slightly higher than the wall, the AA gun gave him a great but terrible view of hundreds of AIC soldiers rushing forward, and two operational spider tanks. It was clear to that they weren’t going to win this fight.

But then he thought about Ada trapped behind him, and all the rest of his friends, scattered about the base. He had to buy as much time for them as he could.

It took less than ten seconds to power up and disengage the safeties on the anti-air guns. Then Tomas moved the gigantic guns, which were on an automated swivel, a full three hundred sixty degrees to make sure they were fully operational. The AIC bombers came back around and were heading straight towards him. He gritted his teeth and tightened his grip on the controls.

“Come and get some, you bastards,” he hissed under his breath.

Then he mashed down on the triggers and the gun exploded with power and pent-up energy.

NINE

SOFT INVASION

“WHERE’S MOMMY?” cried Matthew as his father held him tight, sitting under a stairwell in the moon’s dark-side facilities.

“Mommy can’t come with us, buddy,” Sydal said as he checked the time in his HUD. According to an alert he’d gotten along with every lunar citizen, curfew was from 0700-2000. The clock in the same HUD said it was 6:56am.

“Why not?”

How are you gonna tell him that his mom is dead? And that his sister isn’t his sister, but a monster that killed their mom? How do you tell a boy that his world collapsed over the course of a single evening?

“They’re sleeping,” he said. “Mommy and Rebecca are sleeping right now.”

Wrong, wrong, wrong.

“Did...did Becca hurt mommy? Is that why they’re sleeping?” asked Matthew as he wiped the snot from his nose.

Sydal looked away from his son and bit his lower lip, trying to hold back his own tears.

Goddammit, Matty, I don’t know how to answer that.

But he did know how to answer. With everything going on, he had to be honest. “Yes. But she didn’t mean to hurt mommy,” Sydal said. “Rebecca loves mommy, and mommy loves her. Even now.” Sydal gently lifted Mathew’s face. “You know that, right?”

“I know,” Matthew nodded. “I love them too.”

“And I love you, kiddo. Let’s...you hungry?” Sydal noticed in his HUD that it was past seven. The curfew was lifted until eight that evening.

“Yeah, I guess so.”

“All right. Let’s go get you something to eat,” Sydal gently lifted his son up off of him, then got off the floor himself.

“We gonna get something from home?” asked Matthew.

“No, bud, we can’t go...we’re gonna go to the food court. Okay? You can get anything you want.” Sydal took his son by the hand and started up two flights of stairs to the dark side ground-level door.

“Even pizza?”

Sydal was amazed and somewhat jealous that Matthew went from witnessing his mother’s death to being excited about the prospect of pizza in a matter of hours, although he knew that one day the seriousness of what had happened would dawn on his son. He knew it would screw him up in some sort of way when he got older. He just hoped he could lessen the impact as much as possible.

“Sure, if they got it. Whatever you want.” All Sydal wanted to do was keep his son distracted from the horrible tragedy he’d lived through, though he knew in the back of his head that this wasn’t possible. Because as soon as they ate, he was going to do everything in his power to get the both of them off the moon.

Where would they go? It was a question that Sydal had to answer before trying to depart from the moon. Not sleeping a wink, even though his body desperately needed it, he spent the rest of the night at the bottom of that stairwell thinking about just that. Earth was, of course, an option. They didn’t have any friends, family, or a home there, but with his police experience, it shouldn’t be hard to find a job once they got there. But were they under the same restrictions just imposed on the moon?

Sydal thought about maybe leaving the Milky Way. The idea of living on a colony settlement, out in the middle of nowhere, always appealed to him. There he and Matthew could have a quiet life, far from the hustle and bustle of someplace as highly populated as the moon or Earth.

Lastly, Sydal considered living in a Sanctuary Station. The havens, free from the war or politics of the AIC and UEF, were often funded by and owned by Waterman-Lau, though. Considering their insidious actions on the moon, whatever they exactly were could be found in their space stations as well.

“C’mon, kiddo, finish up. We got to get out of here,” Sydal said. He looked around. People were clearly a bit shaken by the previous night’s

events. It was quiet, somber. But people, being as resilient as they were or perhaps in denial, went about their daily routine. Cafeteria workers showed up working registers, counters, and kitchens. Janitors still did their rounds cleaning off trays and tables.

UEF soldiers stood guard, two at every entrance and exit. They scanned the crowd themselves, looking for who the hell knew what. Their presence was ominous. Just seeing them angered Sydal, because he knew they weren't there to protect them. Why they were there, he didn't know, but they weren't protectors. Not after what he saw last night.

"Where are we going?" asked Matthew, his mouth half full of cookies. He had a kid's dream feast in front of him, with pizza, cookies, and even a cupcake.

"I'm not sure yet. A vacation. Think of it like a vacation."

"Are mom and Becca coming?"

"No, they need to keep sleeping, bud. It's just gonna be us." Sydal pinched his son's cheek. Matthew tried to wiggle away. "Just us guys. A dude trip."

"Cool!"

"Yeah..." Sydal sat back in his seat. "Now finish up so we can get out of here."

As Matthew ate, Sydal went over the messages in his HUD. He had quite a few messages from Detective Janis, his partner. There were thirteen. He started with the three latest messages because those before just looked like general questions as to where he was.

RECEIVED: 1700 : A5th: From: Detective Janis

Where you at? Haven't heard from you since Aitken Basin.

Received: 2300 : A5th: From: Detective Janis

This shit out here is crazy. Never thought I'd see this on the moon. Earth maybe but...anyway, hit me back. Worried. That's right I got emotions too.

Received: 0600: A6th: From: Detective Janis

I don't know what the hell is up but chief called everyone in. 0800 sharp. His words. Don't get yourself fired asshole.

SYDAL DIDN'T TRUST his partner at that point. He didn't trust anyone. Except for maybe...

No. No. Don't let that thought enter your head. Don't you dare.

Sydal looked as his son eating his dream breakfast. He didn't look like he had a single worry in the world. How could a boy be that content after he saw his mother did? What if he was one of *them*, like his sister?

Hatred was too light a word for what Sydal felt about himself in that cafeteria. The fact that he doubted that his son was his son almost made him want to throw up his own breakfast. Still, he couldn't shake the thought. How could he tell? He sure as hell couldn't tell that his little girl was a monster in disguise.

Sydal tried to formulate a real plan. He had to find a ride and get the hell off the moon. Like everything though, the devil was in the details.

The docks were an obvious choice, at least at first glance. That was all Sydal had to go on at the moment. He was tired and had a hard time thinking straight. The coffee helped. The pancakes and eggs would've, if he could've eaten them. That image of Maria dead, body slumped against the wall in their bedroom, made it hard to stomach.

"You keep a tight hold on my hand. Do not let go. You understand, buddy? No matter what, you hold on. Got it?" Sydal instructed Matthew as they stood in line for the buses to the Lunar Dome. There were no ship docks on the dark side. Going back was a necessary evil.

"Don't let go," repeated Matthew.

"That's right. No matter what."

"Sydal?" One of the LTA workers walked up to Sydal. From the looks of her, she was a teenager, just working her first-ever job.

"Yeah?"

"We got you a rover. No bus."

"Why no bus?" asked Sydal. He didn't ask for a rover. He sure as hell didn't order one.

"C'mon, man, I, they told me to find you and show you to your ride. Hell, I'd rather take one of those bourgeois black rovers than the dirty bus." The LTA worker was just doing her job.

But you also don't know that these bastards aren't in bed with whatever Fredrich Bausman and my Rebecca were.

Sydal looked down at his son. With his free hand he felt under his coat to make sure his pistol was still in its holster. Although, according to what he saw and did on Aitken Basin, that meant he might as well have had a slingshot. It did just as much damage.

“No, we’re okay. Tell Ms. Lau I said thanks but no thanks, we’ll wait for the bus.” Sydal wasn’t taking any chances. He couldn’t. It wasn’t just his life on the line anymore.

The LTA worker sighed and rolled her eyes. “Okay, man, but what am I supposed to tell her? She ordered it for you, paid me good credits to get you.”

“Tell her to go—” Sydal remembered to watch his mouth. After all, his young son was with him. “Tell her thanks, but no thanks.”

SYDAL GAVE Matthew the window seat on the bus, which was fine. He could just look over the little guy’s head, considering he couldn’t have been taller than four feet at that point. And he did. The detective kept his eye on what was happening outside the moon’s facilities, out on its surface. What he saw didn’t as much shock him as it just worried him more.

There were UEF ships everywhere. Some waited their turn to land at one of the moon’s many docks. Others, more worryingly, appeared to be patrolling. The worst part was, others were just far enough away from the lunar surface that it looked like they were guarding it. But guarding it from whom? Sydal knew, like most, that the closest the AIC ever got to the Earth was Europa. Any fleet would’ve been intercepted before they even reached Mars.

As the bus ride went on, Sydal split his attention. Half of it was focused on keeping Matthew entertained, distracting him from how scary his small world had just become. The other half was on the lunar surface. One thing that stood out to him was the state of the communication towers that peppered the surface near the dark side and lunar dome. They were in shambles, pieces, rendered inoperable.

Once they reached the Lunar Dome, Sydal and Matthew were confronted with the usual crowds of the morning commute. Again, he couldn’t believe people were just going about their day like nothing was

wrong as they walked by armed soldiers staring them down as they passed. To make matters worse, no one did more than snicker or whisper among themselves when they saw cultists out in the open, standing next to the soldiers, spouting nonsense.

What really worried and confused Sydal was that not far away from the exit from the bus stop, two lines were formed and enforced by soldiers. One line just went into the Lunar Dome proper to go to work, or attend whatever business they had there. The other line led off to the side, into what he knew as a warehouse once owned by Waterman-Lau.

“Present your identification and join the line to your left,” ordered one of the soldiers when Sydal and Matthew reached the point where the lines split. He ordered them to join the one leading to the warehouse.

“Why? Where does that line lead?” asked Sydal. It was a reasonable question.

The soldier didn’t react in kind. “Identification!” he ordered, clearly agitated. Sydal could read his body language. This soldier was ready to act out in violence, and didn’t seem to care that he had a kid with him.

“Yeah, fine, fine.” Sydal presented his digital police badge.

“Detective Rowan Sydal?” The soldier looked at the badge, then back at the detective. “Orders are for all police personnel to report to their precinct for briefing. You need to report to your precinct immediately. To the right.” The soldier instructed Sydal to join the line that led to the Lunar Dome proper.

“What’s...just curious, soldier, where are these other people going?” Sydal couldn’t help but enquire.

“They’re the first wave reporting for processing. Soon the rest of the lunar population will do the same. New policies.”

Sydal nodded to the soldier, picked up Matthew, and went to the right.

Processing? Processing for what?

Sydal couldn’t believe how many soldiers were there. They must’ve been twice as many as he saw the night before. Were they multiplying? Or, more likely, dozens more troop transports must’ve arrived as the residents slept. Again, it was worrying.

Sydal racked his mind for an illegal way off the moon.

It’ll probably have to be under the radar. Something tells me they aren’t just letting people leave.

In his time on the force, he'd run into more than his fair share of smugglers and pirates. Hell, he'd once even managed to corral the Golden Lion himself. That infamous pirate wasn't on the moon, but his brother Wei Wan was, the last time Sydal'd checked. And like all smugglers and pirates he hung out in the Crater, a hidden bar right off a line of long-abandoned AIC docks from before the war.

"Dad? Where are we going? Are we almost there?" asked Matthew, head on his father's shoulders.

"Almost, bud. Just hang in there," Sydal had to find a way to the abandoned docks first. That wasn't going to be easy. Everything, everything was guarded. With soldiers everywhere, sneaking around, especially with a kid in tow, might be near impossible. Still, he was going to try, because staying felt much more risky.

"Rowan!" Sydal heard the last voice he wanted to hear in that moment. He heard Detective Janis.

Sydal tried to keep moving and ignore his partner's calls for him. Was he being foolish? Maybe. But there was no way to know about Janis now. Could he ever really be convinced that Janis had made it out of Aitken Basin alive? He didn't think so, and he didn't want to find out.

"That woman is yelling at you," Matthew said.

"I know, buddy."

"Rowan, wait up! I need to talk to you." Janis pushed her way through the crowds to catch up.

Shit. Deal with this and move on.

"What's up, Detective?" Sydal said coolly, trying to keep things formal and quick. He rubbed Matthew's back. "I'm kind of in a hurry."

"Aren't we all," she said. "Heading to the precinct, I hope. C'mon, I can come with...oh hey, Matthew." Janis seemed startled to see him, as if she'd missed the fact that he was there as she was walking up. "What are you doing out here with your daddy?"

Janis acted like everything was okay, everything was normal. That was a far cry from the woman Detective Rowan knew. Under these circumstances, his partner would probably rant about conspiracies and how the company was out to get everybody. The fact that the diminutive detective wasn't stuffing her face with some snack was another concern. He'd known her for a decade, and he could count on one hand the number of times she wasn't chewing on something.

“Afraid I can’t do that,” answered Sydal.

Janis frowned. “What do you mean? We have to. Orders from on high.” She raised her eyebrows playfully and smiled. “You know how it is.”

Sydal took out his pistol and stealthily pointed it at Detective Janis’ stomach. No one else seemed to notice, but his partner did.

“I do know how it is,” he said, his voice low and surprisingly clear.

Janis looked down, but the expression on her face didn’t change. She just looked back up at Sydal, staring in his eyes with an eerie shine.

“I see. It’s like that, is it?”

“It is,” Sydal said tautly.

“Well, don’t let me stop you. Run. Run as fast as you can, because there’s no getting away from this.” The tone of Detective Janis’ voice changed. It was calm, measured, unsettling, and there was a faint smile on her face that hid what were surely insidious intentions. “Eventually you’ll fall in line. Just like everyone else on this barren rock.”

Sydal slowly backed away, making sure to keep his eye on his former partner. He kept glancing behind him to make sure that he didn’t bump into anyone unpleasant. Once he felt comfortable, he holstered his pistol.

In a flash, Janis spun around and disappeared into the crowd.

Sydal strained to see where Janis had gone, staring into the crowd, when a familiar face came into focus.

He almost fell over with shock.

His wife Maria was standing in the crowds smiling at him. Standing next to her was Ms. Lau from Waterman Lau, and on the other side was his daughter Rebecca, holding her mother’s hand.

Sydal stopped backing up and stared. He couldn’t believe his eyes. Just hours ago he’d watched Maria bleed out on their bedroom floor. Now there she was, as radiant as the day he met her. There was nary a scratch on her body. And their daughter clutched her leg, looking every bit the precious jewel he always saw his baby girl as.

What the hell is this?

Sydal didn’t know what to do. If he’d had his doubts that Maria wasn’t an impostor before, he had no doubt now. So why was he feeling this strange mix of happiness and relief? Who or what would manipulate someone on that level?

“Maria?” Sydal squeezed Matthew tighter to his chest.

“Hey baby,” answered Maria.

“Mommy?” Matthew was ecstatic upon hearing his mom’s voice. He tried to wiggle out from his father’s grasp, but Sydal held firm.

“What’s wrong with you, Detective? He clearly wants to go to his mother,” Ms. Lau said. “Let him.”

Sydal doubted that a woman that privileged, that rich, that *connected* to whatever this was, would let any creature replace her. Besides, by all accounts, she was always a bitch. “That’s not his mother.”

“Really? Sure looks like her. I mean, I didn’t know her, never met her but from the photos and videos I’ve seen...you can’t argue the likeness.” She smiled. “Right? I mean, who would ever believe it wasn’t her?”

How long have they been watching us? “That’s not my damn wife. I would know.”

Ms. Lau tilted her head to the side. “Would you?”

“Go screw yourself. Now if you wouldn’t mind getting the hell out of our way—” Sydal suddenly felt guns pressed against his back.

“Daddy, look, army men!” Matthew stared at the soldiers, heads fully encased in helmets.

“Come here, Matthew.” Maria knelt down and beckoned her son. Sydal wouldn’t let him go.

“Let go of the child,” ordered one of the soldiers behind Sydal.

“If you think I’m just going to let you take away what’s left of my family, you really are one dumb—”

“Either you let him go willingly,” Ms. Lau said calmly, “or those two soldiers behind you will beat you into submission with him still in your arms. Your choice, Detective.”

It was an impossible choice. But giving up was no choice at all.

Sydal’s hand slowly moved towards his holstered pistol. But before it got there, he was caught off-guard. Rebecca ran up to him and clutched onto his leg, just as she had her mother’s. She squeezed tight.

“I love you, daddy,” said Rebecca. She looked up at her father with the same eyes he’d known and adored since birth. Sydal melted.

Sydal was so taken aback by his daughter that he didn’t even feel the tendons on the back of his knees being cut until it was too late. But he did feel the warm wet of blood soaking his pants and running down his calves. His leg gave way under him as the thing pretending to be Rebecca smiled and stepped back, blood dripping from the sharp things that had been her hands.

Sydal managed to hang on to Matthew as he fell to one leg, taking a knee right next to his son. Matthew's eyes grew big.

One of the soldiers grabbed Matthew by his arm as Rebecca retreated back to her mother, a dripping line of blood tracing her steps. Sydal did his best to hang on, but his strength was leaving him. Hell, it was a miracle that he'd kept going so long, but his body was ready to give up.

"Let go of the kid!" bellowed the soldier trying to wrestle Matthew away from Sydal.

"Daddy! It hurts!" yelled Matthew as another man pulled with all his strength on the boy's arm.

Sydal heard a pop. It was his son's arm dislocating. That was followed by cries and screams of pain. If he didn't do something fast, all would be lost.

Furious and homicidal rage overcame Sydal. He didn't notice the crowd of onlookers who'd stopped to witness the commotion. With his free arm he reached into his jacket, pulled out his pistol, and shot the soldier who hurt his son in the face. The bullet punched a hole through the visor of the helmet and sent shards of high-impact plastic and brain matter flying onto the nearest spectators.

People screamed, ran, and panicked, but Sydal didn't. From the ground he aimed at the second soldier. Maybe it was the blood loss or the compounded injuries and fatigue in his body, but his second shot only grazed the soldier's helmet, ricocheting off somewhere into the crowd hitting some poor soul. The next thing he knew, the detective saw a boot coming fast towards his face.

Sydal felt the first blow. It broke his nose and concussed him. Against his will, his grip on Matthew loosened. Then came the fists, more boots, and rifle butts. Through the chaos he watched his son get carried away as the world slowly went black.

With one last hit he was out cold.

TEN

THE END OF THE ROAD

LEFAY WAITED for her control over the spider tank to be complete. In about thirty seconds she'd have dominion over the war machine, and would use it to take out the rest. But first, she needed to survive that long.

Probably a bit angry and annoyed, the remaining operational and uncorrupted spider tank driver focused his fire on the corpse of a fighter ship that LeFay hid behind. At first it was just machine-gun fire that the biohacker heard bounce off or penetrate only to hit the dirt. It sounded like the most lethal of hail.

LeFay used her augmented eyes to look through the downed fighter ship she hid behind. She saw the AIC spider tank stop and turn its cannon towards her. It was time to move. Her arm hanging off her shoulder, sparks and blood coming out of the wound on her back, she forced herself up and ran towards the other spider tank she almost had command of.

Two seconds after LeFay got up and started running, the skeleton of the fighter ship she hid behind was blown to pieces by spider-tank cannon fire. She moved just in time, but the blast wave still knocked her off her feet.

“C'mon, LeFay! Get up!” screamed a voice behind her, urging her on.

“I'm going,” she shouted back, still on all fours and clearly not going, before it dawned on her who was screaming.

She spun around to find Werner rushing up behind her. He chambered a grenade in the launcher attached to the bottom of his rifle and fired at the spider tank advancing on LeFay.

The shot didn't do any damage, but it got the driver's attention. But the captain's actions also got his men's attention.

One of the soldiers still on top of the outermost wall of the base saw their commanding officer running out into the battlefield, towards the enemy tanks and advancing soldiers. And they took action.

Gunfire came raining down from the outermost wall, hitting and bouncing off the spider tanks and taking out the first wave of ground forces that were making a run for the hole in that same wall.

“Where’s my airstrike!” Werner screamed, clearly engaged with his HUD as he came to a sliding stop when he reached LeFay, who was using her one good arm to push herself up off the black soil.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” yelled Werner as he helped LeFay to her feet.

“Oh, me? Just saving everyone’s asses.”

“By being suicidal?” Werner asked, exasperated.

LeFay sensed her hack of the spider tank was complete. “Watch and learn.”

LeFay had full control of one of the spider tanks. Her first and obvious move was to engage the tank trying to kill her. It took a few seconds to get the hang of controlling it, but once she found the controls for the cannon, she took a shot at the enemy war machine.

Like a person getting a surprise punch in the side of its head, the other spider tank almost toppled over onto its side. LeFay smiled thinking of the pilot inside, confused, yelling at his comrade, not knowing there wasn’t anything he could do about it. Without wasting a second she fired again, directly at the tank’s front joints. It crashed forward, immobilized.

“Shit, you really are a one-woman army,” said Werner.

“Two minutes to disable two tanks and take over another,” LeFay said triumphantly. “Damn right.”

“We need to get back behind those walls.”

“You need to,” LeFay said. “I need to finish the job.”

She remote-controlled her spider tank to go up to the first one she’d disabled. From point-blank range she fired a couple of cannon shells, destroying it and killing the crew inside. Before she went on to the second one, the hatch on top of her spider tank opened up, and the crew inside that one jumped off and ran back towards their lines.

“I’m not going back without you,” Warner said.

“Suit yourself, Darren. But...” LeFay pointed at the second wave of ground troops running toward them. “I don’t think they care much about

your romantic gestures.”

“WHAT ARE WE STILL DOING HERE?” Wan asked as he peeked around the hole in the outer base wall.

“We’re making sure they’re okay,” Clarissa said. And she meant it. She had no allegiance to Wan or Werner, but LeFay deserved somebody watching her back, if for no other reason than because nobody else would.

“They’re fine,” Wan said.

“I’m not going anywhere until they’re back.”

Wan looked at her like she was crazy. She had to admit, he had a point. “Screw that. I don’t want to die out here fighting in some damn war I don’t care about. I purposely didn’t join the army to avoid a pointless death like this.” Wan nodded at the ground soldiers rushing in. “I’m getting the hell outta here before those bastards get here. Feel free to join me.”

Without another word, Wan clambered up a rope on the secondary wall behind them and headed deeper into the compound. It took her a moment to realize that he’d had the presence of mind to grab the rope that he’d first climbed over the outer wall with. How it had managed not to get disintegrated when the wall got ripped open, Clarissa couldn’t say. The luck of a pirate, if she had to guess. Then again, Tonga didn’t exactly seem to have it. Must be selective luck.

Where he was going was beyond Clarissa. If they didn’t hold them here, it was only a matter of time before the whole base was inundated. Didn’t make much sense to run that way.

Then again, there weren’t many directions left to run. And if she was being honest, her animal self-preservation instinct wanted to follow him. But LeFay deserved better.

And that moment of hesitation made the choice for her as the rope slid up the wall and disappeared along with Wan.

Pirate bastard.

When she looked back through the crevice in the outer wall and towards the enemy, Clarissa saw a very unwelcome sight. A huge wave of AIC soldiers was advancing on the horizon, many more than the initial wave that was almost on top of them.

That was the main strike force, she realized. This must be a huge offensive. The AIC was aiming to deal a crushing blow.

And LeFay was too busy finishing off the last spider tank to even notice.

TOMAS DIDN'T HIT the bombers the first time around. The anti-air guns took a little getting used to. But once he was calibrated, he was ready for their fourth and what he was determined to be their final run.

The AIC bomber clearly noticed Tomas when he tried to hit them on the third run. Now one of them broke off from the others and headed straight towards him. The others targeted the walls themselves.

Tomas's sweaty grip tightened on the control of his AA gun. He briefly closed his eyes and steadied his breath. When he opened them it was with the determination that he was going to take out as many of those ships as possible and ignore what that meant for his fate.

The bomber that headed straight towards Tomas sped up, no doubt wanting to take out the AA gun before his friends got within range. It opened fire with its guns. Tomas ignored the large caliber bouncing off the steel of his rig all around him. Instead of worrying about that, he focused on the concentric circles of the AA gun's sights. He moved it slightly in front of the incoming bomber and then squeezed and held down the trigger.

Tomas hit his mark. The flak from his AA gun shredded the front of the incoming AIC bomber. It peeled off to the side of the base, cartwheeling and exploding as soon as it hit the dirt. There was no time for him to savor that little victory. Those other bombers were still on their way.

With a mechanical whir under him, Tomas's AA gun swiveled to the left so that he could line up its sights on the other bomber. As he waited for them to get within range, he felt a sharp pain in his stomach. When he looked down he saw a golf ball-sized hole in his gut.

"Oh no," he said, feeling his breath wheeze and soft liquid gurgling up through his throat.

Blood pooled in the fabric bunched up at his stomach and poured off his seat. One of the bullets from that first bomber must've ricocheted and hit him. If it was a direct hit, it would've probably ripped him in half.

But it had done enough.

He looked back up at the incoming bomber, now in range. The crosshairs blurred. His arms were heavy. But he gritted his teeth and willed himself to focus. He wasn't dead yet.

ADA WAS HELPLESS. She'd promised herself a while ago that she'd never again be in that position but there she was, in between the outermost and middle wall, unable to fight or even get out. She'd done more damage to her ankle than she wanted to let on to Tomas. And all the painstaking work of Doc Congo had been undone in a moment as she felt the fire of what she was sure were re-broken ribs.

When she heard the sound of the AIC bombers coming back, she looked back up at Tomas. She watched as he heroically fought off one of the bombers. She cringed as his AA gun got lit up by gunfire. Her heart sank when his rig turned and she could clearly see he was bleeding.

"Tomas! Tomas!" yelled Ada. She desperately tried to convince him to get off the AA gun and head inside the base to get some medical attention. But he couldn't hear her; and even if he could, chances were he wouldn't listen.

Guilt, Ada's constant companion since the *Atlas*, reared its ugly head again. She was supposed to be up there with him, helping him fight. If she was on one of the other guns, at least the attention wouldn't all be on him. Why should he die and she get to live?

"Hey, beautiful!" Ada heard a familiar voice. It was Wan.

"Wan?" Ada said in shock.

"Soon to be gone," Wan said. He looked Ada up and down, frowning at the way she limped. "You want a lift?"

"A what?" she said.

"A lift." He held up a rope. He'd tied off one end to his blaster, clearly using it as an anchor to climb over the wall to get here.

Ada felt her heart leap into her throat. "We have to get up there!" she said, pointing up to the top of the inner wall where Tomas was sitting in the AA gun turret.

"I was thinking more of getting the hell out of here—"

“Now!” Ada screamed.

Wan actually jumped. “OK, shit. You people and your death wishes,” he murmured to himself.

He clambered over to her. “Are you sure you can climb without the use of your legs? I mean—”

“Move!”

“All right, all right,” Wan said. He threw his makeshift blaster weight up and over the wall and pulled it taut. “This should be fine.”

“Tomas!” Ada screamed.

Wan turned to look up.

And then the top of the wall exploded.

TOMAS’S HEAD FELT LIGHT. The world around him seemed to slow down and go on mute. He felt every breath in, every exhale. Even colors seemed more vibrant. A creeping cold took hold of his body. No! Not yet—he still had a job to do before dying.

He forced his blurry vision to narrow on the bombers. Tomas squeezed the trigger knowing that he wouldn’t let go until life left his body. With each shot he felt the vibrations from the kickback in his stomach wound, but he didn’t feel pain. He felt determination, determination to kill every last one of the bastards.

Through the black smoke and orange explosions from the AA’s flak shells, Tomas saw that he’d hit one—no, two—no, three of the bombers. The first peeled off, crashing into the far edge of the walls, blowing up and sending a wave of intense heat in every direction. The second wasn’t fully disabled, but was unable to do another run. It turned and abandoned its run, returning to its base. The third tried desperately to drop its payload before being taken out. Instead, Tomas hit the bombs the second they left the bomb bay, blowing the ship up in mid-air.

Two bombers were left. One of them turned to make its approach from a different angle, not wanting to suffer the same fate as his comrades. The last kept flying straight towards Tomas. Unfortunately, the ex-UEF special forces officer didn’t have any energy left. He couldn’t even move his hands. His veins were on “E”. So he turned and looked down at Ada.

“Tomas!” he heard Ada scream out to him.

He looked down at her and smiled through bloody teeth. Wan was down there too.

Now where the hell did that little weasel come from?

He watched anguish wash over Ada’s face, and he wished in that moment that he could comfort her. They’d talked about her guilt. About the faces she couldn’t remember. He wanted to reassure her it was okay. It was all right. She didn’t need to remember his face. Hell, he wasn’t sure he remembered it half the time.

But he couldn’t. There was no time left, and he had no strength for it anyway. His vision was almost completely blurry now, and his eyelids so very heavy.

He did the only thing he could think to do. He mouthed the words: “I’m sorry.”

A split second later a single bomb landed directly on top of his rig, instantly vaporizing him.

“SARAH...” Werner saw the mass of soldiers coming their way. They showed no signs of stopping, just as the biohacker showed no signs that she noticed them. She was too busy with her new toy.

“I got ‘em,” LeFay said, finally catching on and ordering her spider tank to turn and open up on the soldiers. At first she was mowing them down, and it looked like maybe they’d be able to hold the attackers back.

The ground rumbled, and a half-dozen UEF fighters roared overhead, ripping through the handful of AIC bombers there. UEF bombers followed behind them.

“About damn time,” Werner said. The airstrike had finally arrived.

The bombers quickly took care of the war cannon. They also scrapped the armored personal carriers and a good number of AIC troops.

Everything was looking up.

That’s when Werner stopped shooting and made the mistake of looking up, too.

He saw doom appear in the skies above.

Dozens of AIC warships appeared above the base. Having survived the battle in space against the blockade, they were ready to further their advance on Europa. It seemed like their little base was step one.

Werner had a feeling he wasn't going to live to see step two.

LeFay stopped firing the spider tank when she saw the AIC ships above.

"Shit," she said, a lack of sarcasm in her voice for once. "There's even a damn dreadnaught up there."

Knowing that they stood no chance, the UEF airstrike team simply turned around. The fighters and bombers fled back to their base, Werner had to assume, to ready themselves for the bigger fight to come. The message was clear. Everyone here was on their own.

"Hey, Darren," LeFay said as she walked over and stood next to him, her arm hanging off, blood dripping down her lower back.

"Yeah?"

"I'm sorry. I really am."

Werner took a deep breath and tore his eyes from the sky to look into LeFay's augmented eyes. "I know, Sarah."

LeFay's spider tank was quickly blown to bits by a battleship cannon. She didn't care at that point. She knew what came next.

Werner shook his head. "I love you."

LeFay smiled. "I know."

Werner chuckled. "God knows why."

"You ready for this?"

Werner reloaded his big rifle. "Hell, yeah. You?"

"You kidding me?" LeFay said, tears on her cheeks for the first time since she was a child. "They don't stand a chance."

The both opened fire on the charging line of soldiers. In a matter of seconds, both LeFay and Werner's bodies were riddled with AIC bullets. Werner, only human, fell dead. LeFay, much more than human, went down to one knee, blood both real and artificial oozing out of every wound, her mouth, and her partially blown-off head.

LeFay paid no attention to the soldiers who were, at that point, only twenty yards away. Instead, she looked down at the only man she'd ever loved.

The AIC soldiers ran past LeFay and the dead captain. Their only concern was getting past those walls. One stopped and pointed his rifle at

LeFay's head. She looked up, smiled, and pointed to her chest. It was open, and her core was pulsing so brightly the man had to shield his eyes.

“So long, asshole.”

CLARISSA DIDN'T SAY a word as she watched her friend fall to one knee, riddled with bullets. There was nothing to say. She always knew that LeFay had a death wish. That didn't make it easier, but she knew that she'd finally be at peace.

And she knew what came next. With no way to get up over the walls, she did the only thing she could think to do and went downward. She dug into the soft black soil, trying to bury herself in it, knowing it was too little too late. But she had to try.

The explosion, when it came, didn't disappoint.

The impact was catastrophic for the walls of the base. They were instantly blown over, ripped into thousands of chunks of rock and metal and debris like so much shrapnel.

Clarissa felt pain and pressure in her back for an instant, and then she was airborne. She smashed into another wall just as it went tumbling over, and somehow it provided a soft place to land, or at least a hard place that was moving away from her and lessened the impact.

She stumbled over the interior wall, now flat, and found herself staring right into the huddled bodies of Ada and Wan.

“Ada?” For the first time since the battle started, it was quiet, and her voice carried clearly across the dozen feet of downed wall.

“Clarissa?” Ada looked as shell-shocked as Clarissa felt. “What happened?”

Ada was standing now, staring over Clarissa's shoulder. Clarissa turned around and looked behind her at the battlefield beyond, or what was left of it.

There, in the middle of the clearing where LeFay had made her last stand, was a large crater with scorch marks going in every direction. Dead soldiers littered the ground.

Clarissa looked up at the growing AIC fleet that was gathering in the sky above. There was just no time to mourn. It wasn't fair, but it was true.

“We have to move,” she said.

“What the hell happened?” Ada said again.

“Does it really matter?” Wan said hoarsely, finding his voice at last.

“LeFay,” Ada suddenly said, a growing look of horror on her face, as if she’d just put the pieces together. She knew the answer before she asked it.

Clarissa shook her head.

“I’m sorry.”

“Tomas?” asked Clarissa.

Ada shook her head.

Clarissa closed her eyes. The pain of all this loss was crushing. She wasn’t sure she’d be able to go on.

“Hey! You guys!”

They all three turned back toward the central base, which had been devastated by the blast just as clearly as the triple walls had been, to see Doc Congo scampering over the rubble. The doctor looked like she’d been through hell, but she was alive.

“Doc!” Wan exclaimed. “You’re a sight for sore eyes.”

Congo ignored him, but Wan didn’t seem to notice. For once, Clarissa felt she might be able to identify with the damn asshole. It was nice to know somebody made it through, even if they didn’t really like you. A familiar face was a familiar face.

“We need to get out of here,” the doc said. “Before we get turned into rubble along with this whole damn base.”

“No argument there,” Ada said. “Any suggestions?”

“I have an idea,” Wan said.

Ada glanced at Clarissa, and she could tell she was thinking the same thing. *Anybody else got an idea?*

“Spit it out,” Ada said.

“The same way we got in here,” Wan said.

Clarissa frowned. “In chains?”

Wan snorted. “Hoverbikes.”

“And you know where they are?”

“Nope,” Wan said. “I wasn’t at the main complex to see where they parked them.”

Ada looked sourly at him. “None of us was.”

Wan raised an eyebrow, then pointed at Doc Congo. They all slowly turned to look at her. Doc’s eyes grew big. “I was setting up a triage, I

wasn't sightseeing!"

"It would have been tarped," Wan said, "but with easy egress to the front gate. Sound familiar?"

Congo shook her head.

"C'mon, think," Wan said, leaning toward her. "I know you. You don't miss details."

Doc's eyes grew unfocused for a moment; then she looked up in surprise. "Yes," she said eagerly. "I mean, I think so, but I'm not sure."

The ground began to rumble. They all looked up at the massing ships above. A trio of battleships began to drop low.

"I'm beginning to understand why we haven't seen those soldiers yet," Clarissa muttered.

"Why storm the base..." Wan said.

"When you can just flatten it," Ada finished his thought.

"Bingo."

Clarissa stood. "I think at this point I'm willing to gamble on Doc's memory."

"I like that bet," Wan said, standing as well. "Then again, I've been known to take a bad bet or two."

Ada gritted her teeth and started off.

"Let's go."

EPILOGUE

A NEW MISSION

“DAD?” Ben couldn’t believe his eyes. All of this, the only reason he was on a dreadnought, the only reason he’d been through hell was for this moment, to see his father. To save his father.

“Ben,” said Lee unsteadily. He climbed out of his stasis pod. Ben stood up, backed up a little bit, and looked his father up and down, not believing his eyes.

“How?”

“Long story, son. Unfortunately we don’t have time for me to tell it.” Lee looked around the prison cell. “Where are we?”

“Is it really you?” Ben couldn’t help himself. “I mean, all you?”

“It is,” reassured Lee. He looked down at his stomach. His wounds were plugged up by a little bit of the Shapeless’ black oil. “Mostly.”

Seeing the black liquid made Ben quickly retreat to the wall. “No, it’s not! You’re still one of them! But how? I killed it! The Herald Stone... I separated you!”

“You got rid of the Shapeless, yes. This is, like I said, a long story. But it’s me, son. One hundred percent your father. I need you to trust me on that.”

“I—I—” Ben stuttered, not knowing what to think. It looked like his dad, sounded like his dad. It even had a hard time showing emotion, just like his dad.

“Please, Ben, trust me. Because I need your help.”

Ben narrowed his eyes. “My help? To do what?”

“To end this. I’m guessing we’re on a ship? A dreadnought?”

“Yeah, the *Veruvian*.”

“A rebel ship? That’s...not ideal, but we can make it work. We need to get a ship of our own.”

“For what?” Ben was still having a hard time processing everything.

“I know where these monsters come from,” Lee said. He looked at Ben with the deepest, most penetrating stare he’d ever known. “I know where their home planet is. And I’m going to go there and blow it the hell up.”

Carefully inspecting his father’s face, Ben was finally convinced. The Shapeless could’ve mimicked his voice, even learned things he might say. But they couldn’t possibly replicate the steely determination that made his father a war hero. No, that was his dad standing before him, no doubt about it.

“Then I’m coming with you,” Ben said.

BOOK 8: EARTH ARISE

ONE

BLOOD MOON RISING

DETECTIVE ROWAN SYDAL was awake but his eyes stubbornly refused to open.

An unpleasant prolonged machine sound was repeating over and over somewhere near his head, like a robot with a stutter. Was this what hell sounded like? If oblivion had a soundtrack, did it consist of annoying sounds for eternity?

Sydal finally managed to force his eyes slowly open. He went from darkness to overwhelming brightness as he was assaulted by fluorescent ceiling lighting. It flickered on and off. Figured, Sydal thought. So few things on the moon worked properly.

“Matthew!” Sydal tried to yell out, but his throat was dry and sore. He tried sitting up. He was in a hospital room of some kind. Every inch of his body yelled at him to stay down, using pain to prove its point. That didn’t stop him. He sat up in his bed.

Several IVs fed Sydal fluids. The hospital room was empty. A tube in his nose must have helped him breathe while he was out.

How long was I out? Where’s Matthew? What did they....no, don’t think that way. You’ll find him. You’ll get out of here and find him.

Sydal knew he had to move. Time was his enemy. His son’s trail would go cold soon. If nothing else, his job had taught him the importance of urgency.

The first thing Sydal did was rip the IVs from his arms. Then came the tube in his nose that had fed him oxygen when he was unconscious. Alarms went off on the machines around him monitoring his health. They made the

previous beeping sounds seem positively therapeutic. He ignored them. He ignored everything.

If he was going to make it out of this hospital, Sydal knew he had to get out of the hospital gown and into his own clothes. He'd worked enough nasty business, homicides and worse, to know that they normally put the clothes a patient was wearing inside a bag in their room, assuming they hadn't had to destroy his to save him. His head was groggy, and he couldn't quite seem to remember the circumstances of his ending up here. He looked all around the room, then saw a closet with a long mirror on it.

Sydal reached to open the closet, eager to change out of his gown. That was when he saw himself in the mirror. One of his eyes was swollen. There was a big bruise on the opposite cheek. Wrapped around his head was some gauze with blood that had seeped through and stained. He had the beginnings of a beard.

How long was I out?

Sydal tried to ignore the sad sight in the mirror and continued to look inside the closet. Sure enough, hanging from a hook was a white plastic bag with the hospital's logo on it.

As he got dressed, Sydal found it odd that he didn't hear anything. There weren't the voices of nurses and doctors. He didn't hear the sound of footsteps in the hallways outside his room running to check on him. It was creepy and didn't feel right.

Sydal, now dressed, walked across his hospital room towards the exit. He pulled down the door handle and tried to push it open. It barely budged. Something was blocking the way.

Annoyed, Sydal pushed again with more force. It took a little bit of elbow grease, but he got it open.

And he also saw what was blocking it.

A dead body—a nurse, from the look of her uniform—was slumped on the floor in front of his door. When he looked up, he saw several more bodies scattered across the hallway.

“What the hell?” he croaked through the pain and soreness in his throat.

Sydal didn't know exactly what he'd expected to see outside his door, but he knew it wasn't this. Maybe UEF armed guards, or Waterman-Lau security outside his room, but not death. He sat silent and still, trying to sense any movement. Nothing. He had a feeling the scene in front of his door was just the beginning, an appetizer for a hellscape to come.

He stepped carefully over the corpse and entered the hallway. It was dark. Only the light from a handful of open rooms lit it. As he walked out a little further, his shoes hit something metal.

Sydal knelt down and picked up spent shell casings. He didn't need to be a detective to know that something bad had happened here. He pressed forward, hoping to start connecting dots.

He noticed blood smears on the walls. Many had bullet holes in the middle of them, and bodies right under them. Someone, or a group of someone's, had come into this hospital and started shooting. With the seemingly random placement of bodies, it wasn't done execution-style, but haphazardly. And according to the shell casings Sydal had found, military-grade weapons had been used.

When Sydal reached the end of the hall, he peeked around the corner to make sure no one was there. All he saw were dead hospital staff. A couple were still behind their desks. This death, this killing, he figured it must've come as a surprise. One poor bastard, a janitor by the look of it, still had his mop in his hand. His own blood mixed with the dirty mop water on the floor.

"HUD, give me the lunar news feed," whispered Sydal as he looked around for a downed security guard. Hospitals had security guards. And security guards were usually armed. He'd feel a lot better if he had a weapon.

To Sydal's surprise, there was no feed. There was only static. He couldn't remember a time that that was the case. Even when there were the AIC guerrilla attacks a few years earlier, the feeds had stayed on.

"HUD, track Matthew Sydal. HUD ID #34576890."

Sydal didn't want to use his tracker. It ran through his department, and anyone watching would know he was active. He'd never imagined a world where he couldn't trust his fellow cops, but right now, he didn't trust anyone.

After a moment of accessing and approval, it brought up a search window. After a minute, it had tracked his son's HUD implants.

"Shit...that's not ideal."

According to the tracker, Sydal's son was smack-dab in the middle of the lunar UEF base.

Sydal took a moment to catch his breath. He took inventory of his situation. Without knowing what was going on outside the hospital, he had

to assume it was just as bad as on the inside. He was unarmed; he needed a gun, a dead security guard. He needed something to drink, which shouldn't have been that big of a problem. There had to be water, soft drinks, juices, anything he could think of somewhere in this facility. He needed something to deal with the pain, and the pounding headache making him nauseous. Once ready, he'd tackle the seemingly insurmountable task of saving his son.

If he was still alive. If he was still Matthew.

Sydal found a security guard just outside the employee break room. He, too, looked like he'd been taken unaware. The guard had a pistol with one extra magazine. Sydal pocketed both. Then he raided the cabinets and fridge in the break room, trying to ignore the dead bodies sitting at the tables. One poor doctor had been shot from behind as he was at the vending machine, his innards sprayed on the glass.

Fed, with a bag full of snacks and water bottles, Sydal was ready for the last step before leaving the hospital. Not being in the medical profession, it took him a little while to find where they stored the drugs, the good stuff. It took him even longer to figure out which to take when he did find it. But if there was any time to take a gamble, this was it.

Sydal made his way down to the hospital lobby. He wasn't prepared for the cruelty, the results of which were all over the bottom floor. Doctors, nurses, guests, and patients were stacked up in piles.

There were no flies in the moon domes, but there were stray imported pets. Dogs, cats, and the ever-popular Dats—exotically bioengineered dog-cat hybrids, feasted on the free flesh seemingly offered up to them by some unknown benefactor.

Sydal raised his newly acquired pistol and fired a shot into the ceiling. It was impulsive and dangerous, likely to draw attention, but he was too disgusted. Most of the strays went running off into the dark, though a few bold souls stopped just beyond the doors.

With the collar of his shirt up over his nose, the detective made his way through the lobby towards the blown-out front doors.

They're gonna pay for this. So help me...I'll kill all of them.

TWO

THE END OF THE BEGINNING

“ARE you sure this was a great idea?” asked Ben as he and his father were escorted through the halls and corridors of the AIC *Veruvian*. Behind them were four guards, all with their guns trained on their backs, the desire to shoot their enemy practically oozing out of their pores.

“It’s the only idea, Ben. The only plan. The only way we’ll win,” responded Lee.

“And an alien told you how to do it?”

“Yes.”

“Quiet, you two!” yelled one of the AIC guards.

“A little grey alien with glowing yellow eyes? Who also has telepathic powers?”

“Yes,” whispered Lee, a little surprised. “You know it?”

“I had a run-in with that yellow-eyed thing myself.”

“What did he tell you?”

Ben looked behind him. For a moment he was worried that the guards escorting him would think he was crazy. Then he remembered he didn’t give a shit about them or what they thought.

“He told me how to free yo—” Ben got hit in the back with a rifle butt, hard.

“I said shut up!” yelled the surly AIC guard.

Ben and Lee reached the captain’s quarters on the *Veruvian*. Standing in front of a wall-sized window was Captain Rhule, back to his shackled guests, hands clasped near his lower back. Director Engano sat on a couch in the corner, sipping what looked to be some kind of alcoholic beverage. She smiled and waved at Ben and his father, just with her fingers.

“Leave us,” ordered Rhule.

“Sir?” The surly soldier was surprised.

Rhule turned his head and looked at his subordinate. “That was an order, Private.”

“Sir, yes sir.” The guards left the captain’s quarters, leaving them alone.

“Come take a look.” Rhule said it like a suggestion, but Ben knew that it wasn’t. He and his father walked over to the window.

From the window, Ben and Lee could see Europa in the distance. Between them and the battlefield that was Jupiter’s moon, they saw a floating ship graveyard. They were a mix of AIC and UEF vessels, but many more of the latter. A fleet of fully operational AIC warships, battleships, and dreadnaughts, with their fighters in tow, waited alongside the *Veruvian*.

Rhule turned to Ben and Lee. “I’m guessing you’re wondering what happened here. Let me tell you.”

“We won,” interrupted Engano. Rhule gave her a dirty look. She shrugged. “Not that it will matter in the end.”

“Won what?” asked Ben.

“After the attack on Vassar-1, by what command believes was your United Earth Federation, all our ships and troops were recalled from throughout the universe. All of them. We haven’t been impressively organized of late, certainly not in the last few years of this bloody war, but that business on Vassar-1 had quite an effect. I have to hand that to you.”

Rhule nodded at Lee as if he were personally responsible for the ruin that was the AIC capital world. Ben expected his father to refute the charge, or at least clarify that the UEF wasn’t at the heart of all this, but he merely glanced at the warships outside. “And they were all sent here, to this moon,” Lee said.

Rhule raised his eyebrows. “Do you know why?”

Rhule and Lee had a couple of things in common. One that really stood out in that moment was how hard they were to read. Their body language and tones of voice gave little hint as to what they were thinking or feeling.

“A counterattack,” Lee said without hesitation. “Take out or take over Europa, and the path to Mars and Earth’s moon is clear. Take out Earth’s moon, and Earth is vulnerable.”

“Exactly so,” Rhule said calmly. “That’s what the AIC intends to do, as revenge for losing our capital. This is one last all-out offensive meant to end

this war, either in victory or defeat.”

Lee cocked his head. “But you have your doubts?”

Ben sensed it too, and he wasn’t nearly as perceptive as his father in these little games. Rhule clearly wasn’t on board with his side’s plans.

A muscle twitched in Rhule’s neck. He glanced at Engano. “I do.”

He turned again to face the image of the warships outside. “We’ve never had the resources to match the UEF. We didn’t in the beginning or the middle, and especially not now that we’ve lost our capital planet.”

Ben thought the destruction outside was an indication that they were correcting that, but Rhule seemed to read his mind.

“We had the element of surprise here, which allowed us to overwhelm and defeat the blockade whose remains you see out there in the void.” Rhule turned away from the display. “But now that’s gone. The UEF knows we’re coming.” He paused. “Now add this new alien wrinkle that you and Madam Director here have provided, which leads me to doubt that it was even the UEF that attacked our capital world in the first place. In fact, I have reason to believe that there’s conspiracy afoot.” He took a seat behind his desk.

“Conspiracy?” asked Ben.

“Oh, it gets good here,” Engano said. “One of my agents on Earth’s moon. Their last few reports were disturbing, to say the least. They said that people have been mysteriously disappearing in the lunar facilities. Scientists, military personnel, and dock workers have been showing up torn to shreds.”

“Torn to shreds?” Ben asked. “Like how the Shapeless leave their victims?”

“Exactly. Now, these bits of information are coming along with reports of mysterious deliveries to the moon’s warehouses and docks. Waterman-Lau left, closing down all their shipbuilding operations. And then the latest bit, the most disturbing one: the UEF military has taken over, implemented martial law. From what I’ve been told”—Engano paused here to lick her lips—“the UEF seems to be working with the Oblivion cultists to maintain order.”

“That’s—” started Ben.

“Impossible? I’m afraid not. We lost communications with my agents a couple of days ago, after they reported ‘processing centers’ popping up all over the Lunar Dome and the dark side. Sound familiar?”

“Does your command—generals, admirals, Senate—do they know this? Do they know about the Shapeless?” asked Lee.

“They do,” Engano said.

“And they don’t believe it,” Rhule said. “They’re dead set on the idea of getting their vengeance or dying trying to. In fact, Commodore Thorne is already down there on Europa right now, with a mission to wipe out any and all UEF presence.”

“He’s a fanatic, all right,” Engano offered, as if she were discussing the man’s general temperament.

Ben raised one eyebrow. “But you’re not going to join him?”

“No, I’m not. Neither is my admiral, or the 4th War Fleet.”

“Why not?” asked Lee.

“Like I said, I believe that there’s more going on beneath the surface. We”—Rhule nodded at Engano—“managed to convince Admiral Wulff as well. We’re on hold as the admiral reaches out to command and his fellow admirals to redirect our efforts towards peace talks and fighting our true enemy.”

“Why did you take this meeting with us?” Lee asked. Ben looked sideways at his father, but Lee’s eyes were boring a hole into Rhule. Ben sighed. His father wasn’t one to hide his thoughts. “Surely you don’t need us, Captain. At least, not yet.”

“Because I respect you, Captain Saito.”

Lee looked nonplussed.

“And because I owe my life to you.”

For the first time, Lee seemed to be caught off-balance. “How so?”

“The Battle of Acheron.”

Lee furrowed his brow. “That was a long time ago.”

“You had command of a battleship,” Rhule said.

“The *Glasgow*,” Lee said.

“After the UEF crushed our small fleet, you were tasked with cleaning up and taking prisoners. The other battleships simply destroyed the surviving members of my fleet. You hesitated. You hesitated, and allowed me and my crew to escape. You hesitated long enough that I knew it was an invitation to retreat. One that I took.”

Lee was silent for a long moment. “I remember that.”

“So do I,” Rhule said simply.

Lee was thoughtful. Ben could feel what his father must be thinking. Rhule was returning that long-ago favor with an opening of his own right now, one that Lee had to take advantage of.

“I need a favor, Captain,” Lee said. “One that might save all our lives.”

Rhule grunted. “That sounds like an easy favor to grant.”

“I doubt it,” Lee said. “I need a stealth interceptor.”

The Interceptor-class fighters were some of the smallest ships in the galaxy to boast near-FTL speeds. They could also be outfitted with firepower capable of challenging a mid-size cruiser. And last but certainly not least, they were rare and highly-prized assets.

Ben expected Rhule to laugh them right out of his office. Instead, Rhule surprised him by asking only a single word: “Why?”

Lee glanced at Ben, then back to Rhule. “Long story short, Captain?”

Rhule nodded. “Please.”

“I need it to go to the human-occupied planet where the Shapeless first arrived, and retrieve something called a Herald Stone. Then I’m going to fly to their home planet and send that Herald Stone back to them on a nuclear-tipped warhead.” Lee’s voice was calm and clear, like he was describing the sanest thing in the world instead of the most ludicrous one. “Ending this threat once and for all.”

Rhule took a moment to think about what he’d just been told. Then he accessed his HUD. “HUD, call Corporal Hood.”

Ben and Lee looked at each other. Engano finished her drink. She set it down on the coffee table in front of her quite loudly.

“Corporal,” Rhule said after a moment. “Ready one of the interceptors. Make sure it’s got a full load: nukes, fission bombs, and tracker shots. That’s right. How soon?” Pause. “You have an hour. HUD, end call.”

“You’re going to give me a ship?” Lee asked, the slightest edge of surprise in his voice. Even Lee Saito didn’t have enough of a poker face to bury that much emotion.

Engano actually chuckled. “I softened him up.”

Rhule ignored her. “I am. Putting aside how crazy that plan you just laid out was, the evidence I’ve seen is dire. Long shots might be the only shots we have left.” He paused again. “Besides, like I said, I owe you my life.”

Lee began to thank him, but Rhule held up a hand. “But there’s a catch.”

“What’s that?” asked Ben.

Rhule pointed at Ben. “*You* aren’t going with him.”

“What?”

“I need you. We need you to talk to the UEF. Your experience with them and your relationship with the great Captain Lee Saito here means that you’ll be more effective at this task than any of us.”

“No. Absolutely not,” Ben said. “I’m going with my—”

Ben felt Lee’s hand on his shoulder. He looked over at Lee. His father was sad but also smiling, making an unnerving mix.

“No you’re not, son. I’m smart enough to know that this is my mission. This is my wrong to put right. None of this had to happen, if it weren’t for me.”

“That’s ridiculous,” Ben said. “This wasn’t your fault!”

“You’re needed here,” Lee said firmly. “No one else knows as much about the Shapeless as you do.”

Ben looked at Rhule, who just frowned sternly back.

Engano looked apologetic but no more supportive. “It’s what needs to happen, Ben,” she said.

“This is bullshit!” Ben exclaimed. But even as he raged in protest, he understood that the wheels were already in motion. Nothing he did was going to stop anything now.

An hour later, as he and his father walked behind Rhule toward the *Veruvian* docking bay, Ben was still pleading his case, however pointless it was. “I just...I finally just saved you. And now you’re going to go off on a suicide mission to an alien planet?”

“I doubt Captain Rhule would like to think that I’m taking his expensive ship on a suicide mission.”

Ahead of him, Rhule shook his head. “I’d never think that way, but I’d never discount the possibility.”

Ben could appreciate Rhule’s candor while still wishing he didn’t need to spell it out.

“I’m sorry, Ben,” Lee said. “I wish there was another way.”

“You’re sorry,” Ben said, shaking his head. He held back the words, but in his mind his response was swift.

That’s it!? ‘Hey, son, sorry I disappeared after your mom died. I know you went to great lengths, including leaving the military, to go out and try to find me. Then you found me, and I decided to go and get myself killed anyway. But it’s all good, ‘I’m sorry’. No, that’s not enough.

Ben fought back tears as they walked. Tears of anger and frustration. Anger at his father, maybe? Anger at himself, since he'd brought Lee here. Anger at everything.

"I have to do this," Lee said firmly.

Ben was silent. He'd say anything and everything he could to stop his father, but nothing would work now. He knew that.

"HERE IT IS, MR. SAITO," said a deckhand who appeared next to Captain Rhule. *A salute for Rhule but not even a rank for me*, Lee thought. No surprise. Considering they'd come aboard as prisoners, this was all pretty confusing for anyone who didn't understand the circumstances. It was still all a little confusing for Lee. He still felt like he was in a daze, and had felt that way ever since he'd managed to yank himself free of the Pale Man's control.

"It's a stealth-class interceptor. The height of AIC technology. One of these bad boys costs several billion colonial credits. It's all yours. I can get one of the pilots here to come run you through the procedures for takeoff, and—"

"I'm familiar, thank you," Lee said, cutting off the deckhand. The young man glanced at Rhule, who dismissed him. "Thank you," Lee said to Rhule, genuinely appreciative.

"No need for thanks, Captain," Rhule said, shaking his hand. "Just repaying a debt." He paused. "And hoping to be back in your debt again."

Rhule smiled, and Lee found himself smiling as well. "I'll do my best."

Rhule must have seen the expression on Ben's face. "I'll give you two a minute," he said, then stepped away and gave them as much privacy as an open docking bay could provide.

"There has to be another way," Ben said.

Lee found it impossible to look into Ben's sad eyes. He began walking around the fighter to check the surfaces. "Not that I can think of," he said.

"Well then, let's think of one together."

"There's no time, Ben. I wish there was, but there isn't."

"Stop it! Please just...stop and talk to me. I think I deserve it."

You deserve more than that. But I can't give you anything else.

Lee acquiesced and walked over to stand face-to-face with Ben. They were both silent for a moment. Lee finally let out a ragged breath.

“Ben...I’m sorry,” he said. “Really, I am. I’m sorry I wasn’t around more when you were growing up. I could lie and say it was because of my duty, but...”

“But?”

“But that would be an excuse. I guess I’m just too much like my old man.” Ben wrinkled his nose at that. Lee’s father—everyone had just called him the Admiral—could be a real bastard. “I didn’t want you to grow up hating me and resenting me.” He chuckled to himself ruefully. “Boy, did I screw that one up.”

Ben furrowed his brow. “I don’t hate you.”

“I’ve fought more battles than I can count,” Lee said. “I’ve commanded ships, dreadnaughts, armies. I’ve landed on enemy planets and come out the last man standing, but then I ran from the only responsibility in my life that mattered. I ran from you and your mother.” Admitting it hurt worse than anything the Shapeless had done to him.

Ben seemed to be fighting off tears. “I just don’t...I needed you. I always felt like you not being around was my fault, that I chased you away. I could never understand why you chose your crew, strangers, over your own family.”

“That’s the thing. I thought I was choosing you over that, but I was wrong. It’s one of the biggest regrets of my life.” Lee felt his shoulders sag. “That and the fact that I couldn’t save your mother. That *is* my biggest regret.” Now it was his turn to fight off tears.

“You don’t need to be sorry for that. If all of this has taught me anything, it’s that you can’t save everybody, no matter how much you want to.” Ben hesitated. “But you could’ve been there after she died. You could’ve been at the funeral, said goodbye.”

“I should have,” Lee said. At the time, it would have meant forgoing the most important mission in UEF history, the mission he’d staked his entire career on. But now, it seemed so trivial.

I should’ve been there. I should’ve helped Ben recover, go through physical therapy, stand there with him as he eulogized his mother. I should’ve been there.

“I know I have no right to ask, but can you forgive me, son? Ben?” Lee felt his jaw shaking with the tension and emotion that he didn’t realize he’d

been holding in.

“Forgive you?” Ben rushed forward and hugged his father. His chin resting on Lee’s shoulder, the tears flowed freely now.

Lee savored every last second of their embrace, because he knew it would be the last time he touched or saw his son. Of course this was a suicide mission. They both knew that.

“I forgave you a long time ago, Dad. I’ve never hated you for the choices you’ve made. How can I? But yeah, I forgive you. Of course I do.”

Lee felt a single tear on his cheek. “Thank you,” he said as their embrace separated.

“So this is it?” Ben asked as he wiped the tears away.

“This is it,” Lee said.

“Time for you to go do some dumb shit to save a whole bunch of people?” Ben asked.

Lee laughed. “Yeah, exactly.” With his HUD connected to his new ship, he activated the loading ramp to deploy and open the inner doors.

Lee started to walk up the ramp. He stopped and turned to his son. “Do me a favor?”

“What’s that?”

“Do better than me. Find yourself somebody who can stand you. Have a kid. Be there for them. Be better than me and your grandpa.”

“I’ll try, Dad. Do me a favor?”

Lee smiled. “What’s that?”

“Blow these alien bastards back to whatever hell they come from.”

Lee nodded and disappeared up the ramp.

AS THE STEALTH interceptor lifted up off the docking bay floor and towards the plasma-shielded exit, Ben wasn’t sure how he felt. Not happy. Content, maybe? All of the hardships he’d gone through to save his father were worth it just for that brief conversation on an AIC ship, of all places. They’d both found their peace.

“Sorry to rush you, Ben, but your ship is ready,” Rhule informed him.

“My ship?” Ben was confused and surprised.

Rhule showed Ben to a simple transport ship. It wasn't AIC or UEF; it was unmarked, and quite unremarkable.

Ben looked over the ship. "It's...nice?"

"It's neutral. No frills, no weapons, so don't get yourself into any fights on the way. I'm assuming you still have UEF military codes to get through any trouble?"

"I do, but I doubt they're up to date."

Rhule patted Ben on the back. "I'm sure you'll be fine. You'll figure it out." He handed Ben a hyperdrive. "Once you get to your general, tell him about our proposal of peace and joining forces against those things. If he doesn't believe you, give him this."

"What is it?"

"It's the blueprints and defensive layouts of three of our AIC bases that are previously unknown to your people, based on our intel. Think of it as an act of good faith."

"Okay. But what if he takes the hyperdrive, rejects the offer of peace, and uses that info to take out those bases?"

Rhule smiled. "They're abandoned. And we have twenty-two others down there."

Ben flipped the drive around in his palm. "Pretty empty as far as peace offerings go."

"Most are," Rhule said matter-of-factly. "Godspeed, Mr. Saito. We're all counting on you."

As he began walking away, Ben asked, "Why do I feel like you'll be planning for the worst just in case?"

Rhule glanced back with a rueful smile. "Because only fools plan for the best."

Ben nodded and climbed aboard the transport.

THREE

RUN!

“WHAT IS IT?” Ada asked.

She was kneeling next to Congo, who had stopped and was muttering to herself. What was left of the scout base’s secondary wall crumbled around them as Ada shifted her weight.

“Just getting my bearings,” the doctor said.

Ada glanced from Congo’s face to the sky above. AIC battleships were descending quickly. She resisted the urge to tell her to get them faster.

She heard Wan and Clarissa rush up from behind to join them.

“Not a good time for a breather,” Wan said.

Ada gave him a withering stare. Wan shrugged it off. He was right, of course.

Wan produced a pistol from somewhere. It looked to be something he’d scrounged off a dead soldier. Ada suspected he didn’t even know where it came from, just something he did without thinking. As she looked down at her own empty hands, she decided it was a habit she needed to pick up.

“I see it now,” Congo said, starting off again.

Ada didn’t glance back for the others, assuming they were following. At this point, they were completely at the mercy of Congo’s memory—and Wan’s hunch about the hoverbikes.

The doctor led the way over the wall’s top and towards the wooden boards that connected them to the innermost wall, which would give them access to what was left of the only building.

The nearest of the ships in the descending fleet fired a lone missile. To Ada, it was almost like an old range-finding shell.

The missile struck the outermost wall. The wall was already decimated, but the blast wave was potent enough to propel Ada's group off the inner wall and right into the black dirt outside the central structure.

Ada's ears rang as, for the second time, she survived a fall from the walls. For the second time, it hurt like hell; only now, there was no time to recover. Clarissa was already on her feet. Congo and Wan slowly found their feet, too.

Ada watched as another missile was fired. It took out the secondary wall and shook the ground beneath them. She didn't look back at the ball of flames and flying debris after the missile hit. There was no time. They just needed to keep running.

"We have to go through to get to the garage!" Congo shouted.

"And the bikes are there?"

"I think so," she said. "If Wan is right about what we're looking for."

If Wan is right. There were words not to live by.

The insides of the scout base were in shambles. Dead bodies were trapped, buried under pieces of concrete rubble and metal piping. Half of it was caved in, so navigating was tricky.

Congo led the way through tight corridors. At one point they had to crawl through the smallest of spaces. All the while they had to avoid frayed live wires and climb over the dead. In the back of her mind, Ada could sense the advancing fleet overhead. The random missile strikes were curious, but the full-on assault couldn't be long now. "We almost there, Doc?" she asked.

The ground shook from another impact. It wasn't a direct hit, or what was left of the roof probably would've caved in. If it was a missile, it must've hit close, probably right behind the innermost wall.

"Yeah, we just got to make it through another room. The garage is right ___"

Something exploded incredibly close by. Immediately a thick wave of dust and debris rushed through the corridors, enveloping the group.

Ada couldn't see a thing. She figured the others were in the same boat, so she did all that she could think of as she heard cracking and breaking noises all around her. She reached out and grabbed who she assumed was Clarissa in front of her.

"Ada, is that you?" yelled Clarissa as Ada tugged on the back of her jacket.

“Yeah!”

Wan slammed into Clarissa’s back and cursed as he toppled over. “Can’t see a damn thing!” he shouted helpfully before he fell into a coughing fit. Ada was reminded that Wan wasn’t the healthiest specimen in the world when the air *wasn’t* full of shit.

“No kidding!”

“You guys okay?” Congo asked from the front of their little line. “I think we’re here.”

Ada and the others pushed in tight around Congo, who felt around for a door panel.

She found it. Then she grunted. “No power.” She turned. “The door panel. It doesn’t have any power.”

“Is there a manual lever?” Ada felt all around the doorway. The air wasn’t as thick with dirt, but it was still hard to see anything. She coughed as she strained to see. “Clarissa, can you use your eyes to find it?” she asked, knowing that Clarissa didn’t have the same eyes her parents had gifted her.

Clarissa scanned up the door for a moment, then pointed. “Found it. Hold on, I’m gonna get it open.” Clarissa grabbed onto the lever. She pulled down. It barely budged.

Ada could just make out her struggling. “Stuck?”

Clarissa just grunted in reply.

Congo was already on her feet and throwing her weight into it. Ada added hers. Wan was fighting off an increasingly sickly-sounding coughing fit.

Over the coughing, a sound caught Ada’s attention. It was an odd sound, one she couldn’t figure out. At least, not until it started to get closer.

“We’re out of time!” yelled Ada the second she realized what that oncoming noise was. It was the sound of the base collapsing. Fast.

Ada was yanking furiously hard on the lever now. She put her feet up on the door. As hard as she could, she pulled, using her legs to brace herself. It was just enough to get the job done, and not a moment too soon.

Right as they stumbled their way into the garage, the room they were just in collapsed along with the rest of the scout base. The force of the impact took them off their feet, but didn’t send them flying like the missiles had.

Ada was on the ground again. She was tired of falling or being knocked off her feet. She was sick of being dominated by technology, forces beyond her control, or luck itself. It was time to take hold of her fate, and those of what friends remained, but first they had to get out of there.

“Eureka,” Wan said as he fought off another coughing fit. “Told you.”

The garage they were in was detached from the base, which probably saved them. It had certainly saved the hoverbikes. The gust of the last blast had thrown the tarp half off them and had tangled a handful of them together, but they only needed four.

“Go,” Ada said, as if anyone needed the incentive.

She danced through a series of mechanics’ tool benches until she was next to the nearest bike. It looked like shit, just the way they’d all looked, but when she glanced at the charge she was heartened to see it was topped off.

Ada looked at the doorway they’d just escaped from, surprised that they’d escaped at all. When she looked at the rubble that piled up, blocking that doorway, she thought about how she’d somehow managed to survive another surely fatal scenario. Why was she being kept alive? What did God or the universe want from her?

Wan hopped on the hoverbike next to her, not nearly as philosophical. “We ain’t dead yet.” He kicked over the power on his bike.

Nothing happened. “What the hell?”

Ada glanced over and saw Doc and Clarissa now airborne on their bikes. She reached over and flipped the safety lock on Wan’s bike. It instantly started to rise.

“How the hell have you lived this long?” Ada said as she powered up her own bike and rose as well.

“Keeping smart company, obviously,” Wan said. “And knowing when to fight and when to run.”

“Safe to say this is the latter,” Ada said.

“It usually is,” Wan answered.

Ada shook her head and rotated around on her hoverbike. The garage was little more than a tent, she realized from her higher vantage point a dozen feet off the ground.

“Do we know where we’re going?” asked Wan.

“No idea,” Clarissa said.

“Anywhere but here,” Ada said.

“Wonderful plan,” Wan said. “You pick.”

“How gracious of you,” Ada said sarcastically. She pushed her hoverbike forward. She was comfortable on it, even if it had a wicked shimmy that didn’t bode well for a long trip. Her boyfriend had had a similar hoverbike back in Sweden. He used to take her on rides all the time. When they broke up, she’d gotten one of her own. Partly out of spite, but partly because it was just so damn fun.

“Let’s go.” Ada shot out of the garage and into the wide fields of Europa, and pushed the bike to top speed as soon as she could.

The others followed close behind, though Wan started to lag, and Ada began to suspect that their erstwhile captain had no idea how to fly without a spaceship under his feet and a pilot behind the controls. Typical.

Even though they were out of the scout base and away from the threat of being crushed to death, Ada knew they were far from safe. She risked a glance over her shoulder, expecting that they’d been spotted. The missile strikes on the base were continuing, though she was sure now that the battleships were simply preserving their missiles and waiting to come in closer to pulverize the base with kinetic rounds. That would be a much cheaper way to level it.

Then she spotted a pair of specks breaking free of the lead battleship and starting in their direction, hugging close to the ground.

“What are those?” she shouted back at Clarissa, hoping the former agent knew whatever tricks the AIC were up to out here better than her.

Clarissa looked back. “Those are crabs!” she shouted over the wind noise.

“That doesn’t sound good,” Wan said.

“It’s not,” Clarissa said. “It’s very much not.”

OF COURSE, Clarissa thought. *Nothing can be easy.* “Crabs” were low-altitude fighters designed to fight on a planetside battlefield, not in space. They got their name from the frontal design. Two sharpened, sickle-like half-moon blades protruded out from both sides of the sharp-tipped cockpit. On the field they could literally fly through troops like a smart projectile, cutting down anyone unfortunate enough not to hear them coming—which

was made worse by the fact that they were designed to be as quiet as possible.

“How far?” asked Clarissa as she and Congo noticed their pursuers.

“Hard to say.” Ada in fact didn’t know. She’d been to the base on Europa, the UEF HQ, for training, but that seemed like a lifetime ago now. It didn’t help that everything on Europa kind of looked the same. There weren’t landmarks or anything like that to use as a guide.

“Give it a try,” Wan yelled from the rear. “And I hope it’s real close!” He turned on his hoverbike, armed with his old pistol. He fired at the two crabs quickly closing in on them. The bullets bounced off the forward armor. He’d need a perfect shot to do much damage to the bastards.

He kept firing lamely anyway. If you couldn’t be clever, be relentless. Hadn’t some famous general said that at some point? Probably not. But Wan wasn’t going to let facts slow him down.

The bladed sickles glinting menacingly on the AIC vehicles as they closed the distance. “Who designs these things?” he growled impotently as ships were getting dangerously close. It was bad enough to be killed by these things. But cut in half? That was just rude.

He wasn’t half the pilot that the rest of them were. Even Congo seemed to be able to handle herself well enough.

But he was twice as crazy.

“I’m going to have to take extreme measures!” he yelled forward to the others. His hoverbike had been slowly falling back as he kept up his firing. He told himself it was to continue to distract the pilots but it was mostly so he didn’t think about what he was doing.

“What?” Ada shouted hoarsely, looking behind her just as Wan pulled on the hoverbike’s handlebar-mounted brake levers. “What are you doing?”

“Hell if I know,” Wan said, barely loud enough to be heard over the wind and the sudden distance between them. Then he leaned his body weight all the way to the left, pulling with his arms at the same time.

He got his weight all wrong and by all rights he should have tumbled off the bike. But the complex computer systems built into the gyroscopes on the hoverbike must have been designed for unsure riders because it somehow teased out what Wan meant to do, even if he wasn’t sure himself.

The bike dove in a barely-controlled half corkscrew and Wan felt his ass floating up off the seat then smashing back down at an angle that left him hanging onto the handlebars for dear life.

In retrospect, even a seasoned rider might not have been as successful as Wan was in fooling the onrushing crabs. Both pilots made half-hearted attempts to run him down but overshot, flying just overhead of him.

The trailing one managed to just scrape the protruding right side of the pirate's ride, but missed taking Wan's head off with its forward sickles. Sparks rained down on Wan as he gritted his teeth and hung on for dear life, which was exactly what he was doing before the crab bumped him.

Wan finally got control of his bike a dozen feet from the ground and opened the thrusters up wide as he roared after the pair of crabs who were not bearing down on the others.

Ada, meanwhile, didn't know what Wan was doing and she didn't care. She knew that the crab ships needed to be dealt with or they'd be dead within the next couple of minutes. Wan was the only one armed and if his early efforts were any indication, his gun wasn't going to do much good. Still it was better than nothing, which is what the rest of them had—that was, unless they got creative. She had an idea, but needed some help from one of the others.

“Clarissa!” Ada pulled up next to Clarissa as they both pushed their hoverbikes as fast as they could go. “Let's get low!” she yelled over the sound of the bikes' engines and the whoosh of air through and around their ears.

Clarissa looked at her quizzically.

“Trust me,” Ada said.

She waved at Congo and after a nod at Clarissa, the three hoverbike riders dropped down and shifted their weight towards the back of their bikes in unison.

Their vehicles' rears scraped against the black soil, kicking up dust and dirt clouds. Then they wove in and out of each other, creating a shield of dust.

If Ada had hoped to force the crabs to fall back, she was disappointed. If anything, they came even faster, firing into the large dust and dirt cloud as they did so.

Ada, Clarissa, and Congo managed to dodge the shots, which hit the ground harmlessly. But eventually one would hit them, even if just a lucky shot. They had to go on the offensive.

Wan watched the choreographed dust storm as he urged his own hoverbike forward. “What the hell are they doing?” Wan said aloud to

himself as he watched the three women do everything they could to avoid getting clipped by the crabs.

The crabs had slowed to take aim at the others and that had allowed Wan to catch up from behind.

“All they got to do”—he aimed his pistol at the exhaust on the rear of the crab that had bumped him seconds earlier—“is be patient.” He smiled at the irony of *him* saying those words.

Wan fired at the crab’s engine exhaust. This time his bullets didn’t bounce off. On the third shot, smoke began to billow out of the back of the rear crab. It peeled off, undoubtedly to try and figure out what happened, and stabilize.

Wan watched it, expecting it to return to the fleet to make repairs. But it just maintained level flight. Then Wan saw why.

The fleet was coming to them. Wan saw the growing cluster of battleships in the sky. After leveling the base, the ships had clearly kept coming. Either the fleet was following the hoverbikes or, more likely, it was heading toward the same destination they were. Wan wasn’t a fan of that, either.

Wan saw that the other crab had veered off to one side and turned back to head straight towards him. “Oh damn, he didn’t like that,” he said, guessing the pilot wasn’t thrilled that his buddy had gotten his wings clipped.

Wan had to think fast. In a matter of a dozen seconds he was going to be a bloody smear on the wastes of Europa. But for all his laziness and interpreted cowardice, he’d been nicknamed “Golden Lion” for a reason. Sure, it was mostly self-promotion, but the man could fight. Even more important, the man knew how to use his brain and whatever limited resources he had to survive.

Before leaving the scout base, Wan had made a point to pocket some goodies. It was a little party bag, if you will. Among them were a couple of high-explosive grenades. At the time he didn’t know why he’d need them, but he was happy he had taken them.

Wan aimed his hoverbike directly at the oncoming crab. He armed the grenades, and wedged them between the seats and the bike proper. He waited until he saw the shine of the crab’s blades.

“I’m way too old for this!” Wan jumped off his hoverbike. It continued forward without him and exploded just as it passed under the back half of

the crab.

After he stopped rolling on the ground and came to a stop, Wan watched with glee as the crab spun in circles above the ground, losing altitude and control as it went. Then it hit the dirt, tumbling end over end, sending the pilot flying to a certain sudden death.

Ada watched Wan's heroics with something like shock. She sighed to herself. She couldn't leave him behind. She'd promised herself that she wasn't losing anyone else. No one got left behind, not even a bastard like him.

"What a sweetheart," Wan said as Ada emerged from the cloud of dust and dirt and sped towards him.

"Get on!" Ada barked as she sharply pulled up next to Wan, sending dirt into his face. She didn't have to say it twice. He hopped on the back of the hoverbike, arms around the Swedish Marine's waist.

As Ada sped forward to rejoin the group, she saw that the first crab, the one whose engine Wan had shot, had managed to stabilize on limited thrust and was coming back around for them. She'd warn the others as soon as she reentered the protective cloud.

Not wanting to crash into Clarissa or Congo, Ada carefully reentered the dust cloud. She rejoined their little serpentine formation and movements to make sure that the cloud didn't dissipate. All the while, they looked forward for any sign of the main UEF headquarters.

The crab burst through the cloud of dust. Its blades missed Congo's head by less than a foot. She didn't see them until they were past her and then ducked comically late, screaming obscenities.

It flew ahead a little, then turned around for another go.

"These sons of bitches sure are persistent!" Wan aimed his pistol over one of Ada's shoulders and fired.

Ada shouted as the bullet fired right next to her ear, temporarily making her deaf. Wan didn't care. He kept firing until he heard a click and was out of ammo. His bullets did nothing to deter the crab, which sped straight towards Clarissa.

Clarissa didn't know what to do, so all that was left was to improvise. She knew that she couldn't out-manuever the crab on a hoverbike, nor could she outrun it. The pilot angled his ship down so that she couldn't duck below it. If she couldn't go below, there was only one more option.

“This is stupid. This is stupid. This is....” Clarissa had her plan. There was no time to go back, regroup, or rethink it. A second before the crab crashed into the front of her hoverbike, the former spy pulled back on the controls.

Clarissa’s hoverbike scraped the top of the crab as it lurched over it. She couldn’t believe it as she landed on the thrust bubble on the other side. It was shaky, but she was alive.

The crab pilot must have been furious at this point. For two of those ships, taking out a handful of hoverbikes should have been easy.

“On me!” ordered Ada. She realized they weren’t going to be able to keep this up. They had to deal with that crab; otherwise it would eventually run them down, one by one.

“What are you thinking?” Wan asked her.

“I think you know.”

Wan gulped. “He’s moving too slow for that.”

“Not in this mess.”

Clarissa and Congo followed Ada and joined in making a tight circle, kicking up a tornado of dust and dirt that swallowed them up. The crab, undeterred and determined to kill these pests, flew towards the tornado. The pilot fired into it blindly, hoping to get lucky. Then he extended the sickle blades on both sides of the cockpit, hoping to snag one of them or cut them in half, maybe take a head or two.

To the crab pilot’s horror, he saw a riderless hoverbike fly out of the mini-tornado of dust and dirt heading straight toward his cockpit. There was barely time to scream before the world turned into a fireball.

Ada and Wan rolled to a stop on the soft soil below, both in a haze. Wan stood first and looked up at the sky.

“And that’s that,” he said as he watched the crab flip spectacularly in mid-air, the hoverbike protruding out of the decimated cockpit, and then blow to bits as it smashed into the ground. He knocked black dirt off himself. “I’m glad my strategy could work twice.”

Ada had landed harder than Wan, who seemed to have a knack for falling down and getting back up. Then again, they all did at this point. As she stood, Congo and Clarissa landed next to them.

Congo chose to climb up onto Clarissa’s hoverbike and leave hers to Ada. She took it gratefully, and rolled her eyes when Wan offered to drive. He hopped on right before Ada left him behind.

There was no time to celebrate. Ada and Clarissa had to keep riding fast. The forward battleship that had initially released the crabs was now settling lower than the rest of the fleet, firing her big ship-to-ship cannons at the little hoverbikes far below.

The only upside to being shot at from a battleship was that it took a little while for the shells to hit the ground, though what they lacked in accuracy they made up for in impact power. Ada and Clarissa just barely managed to outrun the blasts, though they were all heavily jostled as each shell impact sent dirt, rock, and flames everywhere. Both Wan and Congo held on for dear life. Clarissa and Ada pushed their hoverbikes as fast as they could go, but they were simply transports and had their limits. The extra weight didn't help.

Ada's hands sweated as she gripped the hoverbike's handlebars more tightly. She knew that eventually the battleship above would zero in on them, and they'd be screwed. They had to find some cover, anything.

"Does this thing go any faster?" yelled Wan helpfully as he looked behind them, jumping a little bit with each shell impact. They were getting closer.

"Yes," answered Ada as she tried to think. "But I'm not in a hurry."

Wan had some sarcastic response, but Ada ignored it. She spotted a sign in the middle of the Europa wastes. It pointed to the left, towards a small mountain range. On it was the UEF military logo and what looked at first to be a random assortment of letters and numbers. She recognized the UEF code.

"Doc! To the left!" Ada yelled out. She pointed towards a small path through the mountain range. Her thinking was that even if it didn't provide that much-needed cover, at least it led to the base, which surely wouldn't take kindly to the sight of AIC ships.

Ada and Congo sped down a narrow path, one in front of the other, winding through rocky hills and the sides of mountains. The other battleships were low enough now to add their own cacophony of explosions to the mix, raining down fire. Surely they saw what was ahead and didn't want to send their whole fleet into what was almost guaranteed to be a buzzsaw of anti-air defenses.

Bits and pieces of rocks flew everywhere, stinging and bruising every sliver of exposed skin on Congo, Ada, Clarissa, and Wan. Their surroundings did provide some cover, though, and absorbed a lot of the

impact from the battleship's cannons, but the resulting shrapnel was so much worse than the dirt and dust of Europa's wastes.

"C'mon, c'mon, c'mon," Ada said, trying to simultaneously outrun the battleships' fire and draw them in.

Ada and Congo's persistence paid off when they heard the sound of explosions from above. They looked up and saw the forward battleship getting peppered with bullets and missile fire. A squadron of UEF fighters zoomed into view shortly after. No longer concerned with the survivors on hoverbikes, a trio of battleships altered their lines to deal with the incoming fighters.

The last of the ground-pounding impacts subsided as the ships worked to defend themselves from these new threats. Ada and Clarissa kept speeding forward.

They all saw the UEF's main base towering over the rocky outcrops and hills on both sides of their narrow path. It was built into a mountain, offering the ultimate protection—or at least, the best possible protection out here. It wasn't impervious to a sustained assault, but it would take considerable firepower to breach its defenses. Ada remembered why she didn't recognize it. This was the back of the base, a restricted entrance full of equally-restricted facilities. She never saw this side.

Several warning shots were fired in front of the two hoverbikes as they reached the small opening that led to the huge iron doors that served as the back entrance. Ada and Clarissa heeded those warnings, stopped, and turned off their bikes. The doors opened, and a group of two dozen troops came straight at them.

"Okay. Let's try this again," said Ada as she stepped off the hoverbike and held up her hands in surrender. The rest of the group followed, hoping that they would be greeted with a little more hospitality than at the now-destroyed AIC base.

At the very least, Ada hoped they didn't get thrown in a trash incinerator.

FOUR

AN ALIEN MOON

SYDAL MADE his way out of the hospital into the streets of the Lunar Dome. Those streets looked and sounded empty. That part of the moon was never bereft of some action, some activity. Witnessing it so barren was unsettling and ominous.

“Hello!” yelled out Sydal. He heard his own voice echo. There was no expectation that he’d actually get an answer. Instead, he just wanted to see any sign of life, any indication that he wasn’t alone.

Sydal crossed the street. Pieces of loose trash and paper were everywhere. He stopped right before reaching the other side, knelt down, and grabbed one. It wasn’t just random office paperwork or trash; it was of all things, a flyer. The detective couldn’t remember the last time he’d seen a paper flyer, and was intrigued enough to read it.

ATTENTION! You are all required to report for mandatory processing under the new laws enacted to protect you and your fellow citizens in this time of war. Processing centers can be found in the Lunar Civil Center, Nieman Forward, the Palisade, and Armstrong Center.

All residents of the Dark Side facility must report to the processing center in the Public Archive Building and the LTA Center. Again, this is MANDATORY. All citizens are required to report. Any and all citizens who do not comply will be subject to penalties. Remember, this is for your own protection and safety. The United Earth Federation thanks you for your cooperation and solidarity in this time of war.

Admiral Daisuke Honma

SYDAL DROPPED THE FLYER. He didn't understand what was happening. He knew it was something terrible, but there was a stark contrast between thinking that a conspiracy was unfolding, and seeing the end result.

Though it took a lot to ignore the natural urge to investigate the mystery in the Lunar Dome, Sydal had a more important task. He needed to find and save his son, Matthew. All indications pointed to his son being at the UEF base on the moon, about fifteen miles from the dome. As he often had since Aitken Basin, the detective needed to find a ride.

Sydal wasn't going to go to the docks. He figured that if there were still soldiers and cultists in the Lunar Dome, that was where they'd be. If he were them, that was where he'd post up, waiting for any stragglers trying to escape. So he had to think of an alternative. That's when it hit him: an idea so obvious it hurt.

The LTA has a service station in the Lunar Dome, over by the tunnel to the water treatment plant. They must have some rovers and buses there, just waiting. And with the police override codes, I can take any of them. Okay, Matthew, daddy's coming.

Bolstered by actually having a plan, the beaten-up, injured, and heavily medicated Sydal hurried down the street. He stayed close to the buildings on either side of the road, mostly store and restaurant fronts. If a patrol did come, he could simply hop inside one of them to hide.

Sydal made it out of the commercial area of the Lunar Dome, turning a corner, and then he could see the industrial district and the LTA station. The only problem was that there were two people wandering the streets between him and it.

Shit. Of course, when I'm almost there...

Sydal hid and craned his head around the corner to observe the two people. They were a man and an elderly woman. Both of them had trouble walking, like children learning to use their feet and legs for the first time. He didn't know for sure, but he had a feeling that maybe they were products of one of the processing centers. They almost looked drunk.

Choices; life was about a series of choices. Depending on the choice you made, the outcome of your life—the good and the bad—came as a

result. Sydal had made a lot of bad choices leading up to that moment. He'd made good ones, like marrying Maria and having kids. But in that moment, when he had to choose whether to continue towards the LTA station past the weirdos or look for a different route, it could have grave consequences. So he made his choice.

Sydal stepped out into the street. Pistol in hand, he walked towards the odd couple. The closer he got, the more their appearance bothered him. Their faces were twisted and loose, as if they were wearing the skinned visages of their victims. Neither of them talked; they just made odd guttural noises. A couple of times they bumped into each other, and snapped at each other like dogs or wild animals. That made him disengage the gun's safety.

"Hello? Excuse me!" Sydal called out to the two people, since they didn't seem to notice him. That was, until they did.

Both of the strangers looked up at Sydal. Their bottom jaws elongated, going down to their chests. Out of those mouths they let out high-pitched shrieks before running as fast as their wobbly legs could take them, straight at him.

Sydal wasn't terribly surprised. He knew that Fredrich Bausman wouldn't be the only one of those monsters. Still, it was disheartening and frightening. Because those two strangers were fully capable and, he had no doubt, had every intention of ripping him to shreds.

After brief consideration, Sydal realized running wasn't an option. He was in no shape and frankly, he was angry and wanted to kill some shit. So he lifted his pistol, aimed it directly at the elderly female monster, and started firing.

All Sydal really remembered about his first confrontation with the Shapeless was the dodging, and the bladed hands and sheer ferocity of the creature. He'd forgotten that bullets didn't do much of anything except annoy the monster. History repeated itself.

Sydal regretted not running instantly. He just wasn't thinking straight, but it was too late now. With its head full of bullet holes, the elderly monster kept coming. Now there was no choice. He turned to run.

As soon as Sydal turned around, he was surprised to see a UEF military transport come screeching around the corner. There were two soldiers. One was behind the wheel. The other was on top, manning the gun.

"I knew it! We have some stragglers here," said the soldier on the gun.

“Does that one have a pistol? I didn’t think they could actually do that, at least not yet. They’re still too young,” answered the driver.

Sydal froze in place, not knowing what to do. He was stuck between some alien monsters and a machine gun.

“Should we shoot ‘em?” asked the gunner. “Can I shoot ‘em?”

“You know the policy. Stray away from the pack and they get put down.”

Sydal, not wanting to wait to get shot, quickly raised his pistol and put a bullet in the shoulder of the soldier behind the mounted gun. Before he could get off a second shot, the man started spraying bullets wildly.

Sydal began zigzagging around, trying not to get shot. He dove behind a raised portion of roadway, but it exploded as the machine gun zeroed in on it. He lunged from behind it, shooting wildly as he hit the ground running again. He was so caught up in trying not to get shot, he didn’t pay attention to the two monsters, who hadn’t stopped coming forward.

The two Shapeless passed Sydal and went straight for the transport. Panicked, the driver put it in reverse and tried to outrun them. But they had gained momentum the more they ran, and had no trouble catching up with it.

Sydal got up off the street. For a second he watched the two Shapeless peel the transport open like a tuna can. Then they went to work on the driver and the bloody gunner. The detective heard the screams as he ran as fast as he could towards the LTA station.

As he ran, Sydal stumbled over his own feet. Something felt off, and it wasn’t just the painkillers. It wasn’t until he got to the doors of the facility that he noticed the blood that soaked the side of his leg, and the small chunk of his thigh missing. Whatever was between getting shot and getting grazed, that’s what had happened in his exchange with the transport-mounted machine gun a minute earlier.

There was no time to assess the wound properly. Blood still trickling off his boots, Sydal entered the station. Immediately it became clear that he needed a source of light if he was going to get anything done in here.

Sydal searched around with his outstretched hands for a light switch or anything to help him see. The only windows in the building lined the top of the wall near the ceiling, and they were shuttered. Only the tiniest slivers of light made their way through, not providing enough illumination to find

anything. Rows and rows of rovers and buses made it even harder, sitting as dark looming Goliaths.

Sydal's hand found a light switch, and he turned it on. One by one the harsh fluorescent lights that hung from the station's ceiling sparked up.

There were vehicles as far as Sydal could see. Now there was no telling which were operational, which were there just for service, and which ones were no longer functional. He had to decide which one to take.

Sydal limped through the aisles of vehicles. He figured that since they were all in a line, he needed to choose a ride that was nearer to the door. Plus, he wanted one that was more low-key, which excluded the buses.

Sydal, still unsure how long he'd been in that hospital bed, how long his son had been missing, had to remember he was in a hurry. Yes, he was bleeding and hurting, but none of that mattered. If it was the last thing he ever did, literally, he was going to get Matthew off-planet.

There's no time to be picky.

Sydal was about halfway through the deceptively large station when he heard the echo of the doors opening near the entrance. He made a calculated decision to hide, not knowing who was coming but guessing it was soldiers. His chosen spot was inside one of the buses.

He heard a voice from near the entrance. "The guy must've gone through here."

"Is he a survivor or one of those things?" There was another voice, so Sydal knew there were at least two of them.

"He's a survivor," answered a third voice. The detective cursed to himself. He was hoping it was only two soldiers.

"How do you know?"

"I just do."

"Yeah, Franks, didn't you hear the radio? He's some kind of police officer or detective."

Sydal silently moved towards the back of the bus. Careful not to reveal himself, he peeked up through the window. But he was so far down the line of vehicles he didn't see a thing.

"A cop? How the hell did they miss a cop? Thought those assholes were the first ones rounded up."

"Yeah, I don't know how, but they definitely missed one. Those boys in 345th were never the sharpest of knives."

“That’s a nice way to put it. Anyway, let’s search this place so we can get out of here.”

“You guys can search. I’m just going to follow that obvious blood trail on the ground. See where that takes me.”

“Phil, you’re acting like you actually want to find the guy. Let’s just walk from one end to the other and call it a day, instead of getting shot by some deranged detective. Whaddaya say?”

“I say I’m getting a promotion and you two are gonna be thrown in the processing center with the rest of those sad sons of bitches.”

Sydal looked down at the blood pooling around him. He’d been in such a hurry he’d overlooked the trail of blood he’d left behind from his thigh injury. When he looked through the window he clearly saw it on the floor of the station, leading straight towards the bus doors.

Sydal saw and heard one of the soldiers creeping up to the bus he was in. There was no doubt in his mind that the soldier would get on that bus and find him. He’d have to fight. That wasn’t ideal, but it was okay. He was more than willing to fight.

That willingness to fight dissipated some when Sydal checked his pistol and found that he was down to one bullet. His streak of bad luck remained untainted. He couldn’t risk using that last bullet. If he missed, then he just gave away his position, and the others would quickly find and kill him. If he hit the soldier, it would be the same outcome. The detective wasn’t a super soldier, cyborg, or hero. He was just a cop with one bullet left.

Sydal slunk down between two rows of bus seats. He flipped his pistol around, holding it by the barrel. His only option was to pistol whip the soldier and hope it was enough of a surprise that there wasn’t much of a fight back, because he was an injured middle-aged man and the soldier looked to be young, in the prime of his life and trained to kill.

“Hey guys…” Sydal heard the soldier and the bus doors opening. “I think I got something here.” There was no doubt he was talking over his HUD to his two comrades.

Turn around. Pretend you didn’t see anything. Please, kid. I don’t want to hurt you.

That was the truth. Sydal didn’t want to hurt the soldier that was in that moment boarding the same bus he hid in. He didn’t want to because he knew the kid was just doing his job, even if that job was rotten or downright evil. Sure, this kid was old enough to know better, but he was still just a

stupid kid to Sydal and he'd get no pleasure from killing him. Then again, he'd get even less from being killed himself.

The soldier kept coming. His focus was on the trail of blood that led to the back of the vehicle, where Sydal hid. No doubt they were both extremely nervous. Both of them knew that one finding the other could very well lead to a conflict that could end with a death.

Sydal took a deep breath. He reared back with his pistol as he saw the soldier's flashlight approach down the bus aisle. Repeatedly he told himself to be quick. If he acted fast, he could still get out of here in one piece, get a rover, and drive into what was all but certain death. But at least there was a chance that he could save the only family he had left.

Before the soldier could discover Sydal, he sprang out from his hiding place, lunged forward and whacked the young man on the side of the head. Not wanting him to recover, Sydal hit him again. That second time cracked his helmet. And that was when the detective discovered the one fatal flaw in his plan.

The soldier, a little rattled but not seriously hurt—more surprised than anything—fought back. He hit the detective in the jaw with his rifle, almost knocking him out.

As Sydal lay there groggy, the soldier aimed the rifle at his chest.

Instinctively knowing that hesitating for a second would spell the end for him and his son, Sydal's feelings on the encounter changed. It was life and death. With both arms and his body weight, he grabbed the soldier's rifle, leaned forward, and pushed down as hard as he could.

The soldier fired. Sydal had no idea how close he'd come to getting shot in the crotch. But bolstered by the animal instinct to survive, Sydal head-butted the helmet-wearing soldier. Unsurprisingly, it did more damage to Sydal himself.

Everything started to spin. Sydal's head was killing him. His own blood dripped down from his receding hairline, but his otherwise ill-advised headbutt at least forced the soldier to stumble back, giving him a window. Quick as he could, Sydal yanked out his pistol and fired.

He glanced at the readout on the side just to confirm.

Empty.

There was a loud thumping noise as the young soldier fell on the bus floor, dead. A still-smoking hole in the visor of the kid's helmet told the story; no need to check his pulse or if he was breathing.

While happy to still be alive, Sydal knew that he needed to think fast. Those other two soldiers must've heard the gunshots, and were undoubtedly on their way to get him. Again, he had to go into strategy mode.

As he heard the boots of the remaining two UEF soldiers approach, Sydal frantically grabbed the dead one's rifle and searched his body for ammo or anything else he could use. In his haste, he was actually efficient. It was a new trait he'd picked up out of necessity ever since Aitken Basin. Maybe an old dog could learn new tricks after all—or an old detective, at any rate.

Sydal managed to scrounge together two extra magazines for his pilfered rifle, a standard-issue pistol, a grenade, and a med kit that he desperately needed. Not only was he still bleeding from the bullet wound on his thigh, but Sydal was also surely concussed from his dumb headbutt.

There was no time to mend his wounds right now, though. In that moment, Sydal had to mount a defense. Bereft of good options, he'd have to resort to a firefight, using the bus itself as cover.

"Hopkins! Hey, Hopkins! You okay?" asked one of the soldiers as the other followed close behind. Their rifles were up and at the ready, prepared for an engagement whenever it came and wherever it came from.

This time Sydal didn't wait for the enemy to come to him. That illusion that briefly ran through his mind of getting out of this debacle without killing anyone was destroyed along with the first young soldier's face. No, this time he'd take the fight to them.

Sydal popped up and shot the window, aiming at one of the soldiers, and then came fatal flaw number two. The windows on LTA buses were strong, really strong. Though not bulletproof, they were meant to be strong enough to maintain the atmosphere inside the vehicle when out on the lunar surface, and of course to withstand any hard impacts.

The first shot cracked the bus window and made Sydal's ears ring. Fatal flaw three: shooting a weapon in an enclosed space. In that moment he hated how dumb he was being, but there would time to beat himself later, if he survived.

The soldiers outside were more persistent. They knelt down in the firing position taught to them in basic training. Sydal heard the bullets create crack after crack in the glass before it burst apart and super-heated rounds entered the bus.

Not willing or able to afford being pinned down, Sydal waited for two more windows to break. When the firing stopped, he realized the soldiers were reloading at the same time. They should know better, but in that moment he wasn't asking questions. He needed to take advantage of the opening.

Sydal popped up as fast as he could. His first couple of shots were wild and hit nothing. Still suffering from the headbutt, his vision still spun a bit, though his third shot hit one of the soldiers in the leg.

Considering he wasn't much of a marksman compared to the rest of the detectives in his department, and none of them were exactly known for their performance at the range, Sydal was happy to hit anything.

The two soldiers retreated to cover. Knowing that he could hide behind the window right next to it, Sydal took up position at one of the broken windows. He fixed his aim on the rover that his enemies hid behind. "Lay down your guns!" he yelled.

"Screw that! Where's Phil?" yelled back one of the soldiers.

Sydal glanced over at the young soldier he'd killed. On his Kevlar vest was a name tag: "P. Hopkins". It didn't take a detective to put together that that must've been Phil.

"Dunno what you're talking about! Put down your weapons! I'm just looking for a ride! No one else needs to get hurt!" answered Sydal.

"If you don't tell us where Hopkins is, there'll be a whole lotta hurt, asshole!"

Sydal realized talking wasn't going to work, but he needed time to assess his situation. As far as he saw it, he had the advantage despite being outgunned by one man.

Instead of answering with words, Sydal popped up into the LTA bus' window frame and started firing. He ducked back down when the two soldiers returned fire. This went on for a few minutes before the detective had an idea.

How the soldiers didn't think of throwing a grenade first was beyond Sydal. He was in the perfect position to be especially vulnerable to a throwable explosive. But they didn't, so he did.

Sydal waited for the soldiers to reload again. But this time they did as they were taught and covered each other as they put in new mags. There was a better than small chance that the detective was going to shot at in his attempt. That was acceptable.

Bullets bounced off the thick metal exterior of the bus, right near the broken window Sydal was going to use. Sydal didn't lose his nerve. Already armed, all he had to do was aim and throw.

And that's exactly what he did.

"Move!" Unfortunately for the detective, the soldiers saw the grenade, which missed its mark and bounced off the lower part of the rover's door that they used for cover. It actually rolled a little bit in Sydal's direction before exploding.

Sydal took cover. He didn't know what to do now. If he kept this gunfight up, eventually a well-placed or lucky shot would take him down. Predictably, the soldiers weren't thrilled that he'd tried to blow them up, and really laid into the bus.

It had finally happened. Sydal was officially out of ideas. He had no idea how to get himself out of this pickle. His thoughts started to wander. Death started to sound more attractive. After all, his son must've been dead by then, replaced by the Shapeless. So why keep fighting? Why keep suffering?

No! He's alive. And if he's not, they'll all pay for taking everything from me!

Sydal had one magazine left for his rifle. He loaded it in, took position right under the broken bus window, and took a deep breath. With every fiber of his being he convinced himself that he wouldn't get shot. At least, not fatally.

Out of nowhere, the firing stopped. It was beyond strange. All Sydal heard was the clang from a rifle hitting the floor, and wet gargling noises.

Sydal barely glanced above and through the broken window. One of the soldiers, the non-injured one, the one he hadn't shot in the leg, had one arm extended. No, it wasn't just extended; it was unnaturally stretched out into a spike. That spike impaled the hobbled soldier through the throat.

"Come on out. I won't shoot you. I promise," said the Shapeless version of a soldier.

Sydal watched as the spike got withdrawn from the now grievously-injured soldier. The young man fell to the ground, blood gurgling out of his mouth. He bled out shortly after.

The faux soldier turned and looked Sydal directly in the eyes. He smiled as he wiped his colleague's blood off his arm.

“Come, friend. There’s no reason to re-re-re-resist. Yes, resist. There’s no reason to resist. You are only delaying fate. You can’t—” In less than a blink of an eye, another spike came shooting out of the soldier’s chest. It punctured the side of the bus, just barely missing Sydal’s head.

Startled, Sydal scrambled to his feet. Rifle in hand, he started shooting at the window behind him. He kept shooting until it shattered. That was his only way out. There was no other chance to escape.

“You can’t run!” yelled the Shapeless soldier. Its arm, still in the bus, changed form. Multiple additional tendrils sprouted out from the first, anchoring themselves in the metal interior and exterior of the vehicle. Then it pulled as hard as it could.

Sydal tried to hold on as the bus fell over on its side towards the faux soldier. But he couldn’t. Luckily he landed on his side and not his neck.

Used to being thrown around, beaten, and bruised at this point, Sydal wasn’t even fazed. He immediately started climbing over the seats and out the window he’d broken.

As soon as he was on top of the bus, Sydal emptied the last four or five bullets from his rifle. As he expected, it did little to no damage. Any damage that it did do quickly filled in, like burying a hole in the beach as the tide comes in.

“You can’t hide, friend. Embrace it! Embrace the Abyss like the others. Let me end the pain that tortures you so much.” The Shapeless retracted his tendril from the bus. It whipped around as it quickly turned back into the shape of a man’s arm. The uniform over it was even restored.

I can’t run? Watch me, asshole.

Sydal jumped off the bus. Then he ran.

FIVE

RETURN TO SERVICE

BEN THOUGHT about what kind of reception he'd find waiting for him on Europa. Would he be met with kindness, be welcomed back into the UEF military fold? Would he be branded a quitter and dismissed as easily and callously as he'd set aside the duty? Would he simply be shot out of the sky, blown to bits as an AIC spy?

Ben's transport entered Europa's atmosphere. He ignored the shaking that came from the intense friction of entering. That same friction produced fire that enveloped the ship; he ignored that too. Ben's thoughts drifted.

What are you going to tell them when you get there? How do you tell a general that he needs to stop fighting, stop defending the same base he probably championed for years?

It had been a long time since Ben had been on Europa, since he'd set eyes on the blood-soaked moon of Jupiter. Almost every UEF soldier—Marine, pilot, officer, or otherwise—had to spend at least one tour there. As such a strategically important base, it had to be constantly supplied with fresh souls to man the walls, guns, and ships.

Ben, like most soldiers stationed on Jupiter's moon, had no good memories of the place. He went along with the myth that the men and women circulated about why Europa's soil was so black. They told each other and new arrivals that it was so dark because it was soaked with the blood of all the people who'd died there. The thing was, it was believable, considering that both the UEF and AIC suffered more casualties on the moon than on any other planet or station in the war.

Ben couldn't get his father off his mind. Even as he exited Europa's atmosphere and laid his eyes on the universe's largest graveyard, he found it

hard to focus on the task at hand.

Ben saw that he was being hailed. Judging from the signal, it was AIC. After remembering what Rhule had told him about the man in charge of the Europa offensive, Commodore Thorne, he knew that answering that call probably wouldn't have ended well. His priority was reaching the UEF base.

The hailing continued. Ben saw Thorne's fleet just ahead. It looked like it was amassing just outside the mountains where he knew Europa's main base was. They were preparing for an assault.

Two AIC fighters flew towards Ben's transport. He knew that his ship wasn't armed; nor was it fast enough to outrun the fighters. It looked like he had no choice but to answer the AIC's call, or else.

"Answer them, Ben Saito." Ben heard a voice in the cockpit of his transport ship. He knew that voice, but he couldn't have possibly heard it. Not here, not in the real waking world.

"Who the hell said that?" Ben looked around in the cockpit and didn't see anyone or anything.

"Attention, unknown transport. Identify yourself," ordered one of the fighters. They flew next to the transport on either side.

Ben regretted not coming into this situation with more of a plan. Plus he had a mysterious passenger, or was hallucinating. All was not well in his world at that moment.

"Answer them. Or I can, if you wish." There was that voice again.

"Okay, who the hell are you? Show yourself!" insisted Ben. He really hoped he wasn't losing his mind.

"Attention, unknown transport. Identify yourself or we will be forced to shoot you down. I repeat, identify yourself or we will shoot you down." The fighters weren't playing around.

"Of course, Ben Saito." Right in front of Ben's seat, between himself and the control board, rose the yellow-eyed alien that he'd seen in his mind link and that had kept his father alive.

"What the hell!" yelled Ben. If it weren't attached to the floor of the cockpit, he would've fallen backwards in his chair.

"Hello, Ben Saito. It is good to see you again," said the yellow-eyed alien.

Ben didn't know how to answer. The last thing he expected was to see that freaky little alien again, let alone in this situation.

“I see that you are alarmed. I am sorry. I did not mean to startle you.”

“How are you...?”

“Part of me detached from your father, Lee Saito, before you two parted ways. I boarded this transport and waited for the right time to reveal myself.” The yellow-eyed alien explained it like it all made perfect sense, but it didn’t to Ben.

“Why? And can you please move? This is making me really uncomfortable.”

“Sorry. Of course, Ben Saito.” The alien stretched his body so that its legs elongated, the top half of its body bent because of the cockpit roof, and stepped over Ben. Then it returned to normal once it was on the other side of him.

“Thank you. Now....” Ben spun around in the pilot’s seat. “Why should I answer them?”

“Because they will blow you out of the sky, and we can’t have that. Not if we are going to stop the Shapeless.”

“Okay, well, what do you suggest? We can’t outrun them. We can’t fight them. So what?”

“Let me take care of it.” In front of Ben’s disbelieving eyes, the yellow-eyed alien changed his form, shapeshifting into a near-perfect replication of AIC Senator LeFleur.

“How did you do that?” Ben was in awe. He’d seen the shapeshifting of a Shapeless before. It was a terrible, grotesque thing. But his yellow-eyed friend’s form changed seamlessly and quickly, with none of the gross popping and breaking sounds.

“From our mind link, Ben Saito. I had access to all of your memories, including this man. A politician, yes? High ranking, yes?” The yellow-eyed alien had everything right except for LeFleur’s voice.

“Your voice,” pointed out Ben.

“Is it not right?”

Ben shook his head.

“Sorry about that. Here, please let me—” The alien, now in the form of LeFleur, leaned forward and put his cold hand on Ben’s forehead. It was only for a second. “There. Is that better?” The alien’s voice suddenly perfectly matched the deceased senator’s.

“Perfect. Creepy, but perfect.”

“Unidentified transport. You have three seconds to respond. One, two...” The fighters ran out of patience.

Ben handed over the coms to his alien friend. “You’re up, buddy.”

“Of course. Hello, this is Senator LeFleur from the AIC Senate. I request passage through to the UEF base.”

“Senator?” The AIC fighter pilot was surprised. Not only because he didn’t expect a senator to answer, but also because he was under the impression, like most of the AIC people and military, that the Senate had been wiped out on Vassar-1.

“That’s right, son. Send my request to your commander. We’ll wait for his answer.” The alien pretending to be LeFleur had a gift for mimicry, which worried Ben a bit. He couldn’t help but shake the feeling that this was all a trick of the Shapeless. But what other choice did he have?

“Now we play the waiting game,” said Ben as he sat back in his chair and exhaled.

“The waiting game?” asked the yellow-eyed alien in LeFleur’s voice.

“It’s...we just wait for that answer. Don’t do anything.”

“How is that a game?”

“It’s not. Just—” Ben suddenly saw another signal, saying that they were getting another call. This time it was from a dreadnaught, not the two AIC fighters that flanked the transport.

“Ready?” asked Ben as he was about to answer the call.

“Yes, I believe so.”

Ben pushed the button and answered the call from the AIC dreadnaught. It was a video call, so he made sure to get out of view so that whoever was on the other end only saw the faux LeFleur.

“This is Commodore Thorne of the AIC Navy.” A short, portly, stoic-looking bearded man appeared in the video chat. Ben knew that it would probably be an officer in the call, but not the commander of the attack on Europa.

“Good day, Commodore. I am Senator—”

“I know who you are, Senator. We’ve met before, back on Vassar-1. What are you doing on Europa? We’ve received reports that you perished alongside the rest of the Senate in the Federalist attack on our home.” Thorne’s voice gave off the aura of authority, but there was a bit of mania hidden in it, Ben thought. But perhaps he was projecting based on what he’d been told about the man.

“Thankfully those reports were wrong, Commodore. Some of us took refuge in the bunker under the Senate Circle. We barely made it off-planet alive.”

“That’s strange. We haven’t heard of anything or anyone from home. It’s been radio silent since the attack.”

“We were too busy trying to survive to make calls.”

Thorne was silent for a moment. “Why are you here, Senator? We’re about to attack and overwhelm the Federalist base here. With all due respect, this is no place for you.”

“I’ve been asked to parlay with the UEF command at that base.”

“Who? Admiral Chevenko?”

That was the first good news Ben had heard in a while. The admiral was a family friend. He’d known him since he was a teenager. If Chevenko was in charge of the UEF Europa base, then that should make Ben’s job a little easier.

“Yes, Commodore, I’m to speak to the admiral. Orders from the rest of the Senate to try and put an end to this madness.”

“We’ll grant you passage, Senator,” Thorne said gruffly. “But come the morning, we’re attacking that base. If you don’t return or we don’t receive orders to stop, then I can’t help you. Best of luck, sir. End call.”

When the connection ended, the creature turned to Ben. “That was not so hard, Ben Saito.” The fake LeFleur smiled, pleased with himself.

“You’re right. Surprisingly, it wasn’t,” Ben conceded, but he was still skeptical of Thorne’s intentions.

The creature frowned at Ben. “You do not trust him?”

Ben was caught off-guard. Was that intuition, or was the creature still reading his mind? And was there anything he could do about it, if it was?

“I trust that he won’t disobey the same Senate that gave him his bars and stars,” Ben said. “Beyond that, I don’t trust him at all.”

The creature smiled. “So the subterfuge was a success.”

“For now,” Ben conceded. “But that was the easy part. Now we have to convince the UEF to let us in.”

“Leave that to me.”

SIX

ARCHEON

LEE SAT in the cockpit of his stealth interceptor. It sped away from Europa, through the newly-minted graveyard of ships and souls just outside Europa's orbit. He spun up the fold jump engines with a course for the often-forgotten planet near the edges of human-occupied space, Archeon.

According to what he was shown in his mind link with the yellow-eyed alien, Archeon—a desert mining planet long thought lost and defunct—was where the Herald Stone had landed. It was humanity's first confrontation, first encounter, with the Shapeless. It was also where the biggest chunk of the strange rock could be found.

Lee's plan was simple. He was going to land on Archeon near the Herald Stone. Then he'd take that Herald Stone and attach it to a missile. How'd he do that he hadn't figured out yet, but he would. Last, he'd leave, doing this all as fast as possible, and head straight towards the Shapeless home planet and kill them. In the process, he'd save Earth and humanity, making up for all those he'd failed and lost under his various commands.

That was the plan, at least.

"Fold jump in five, four, three, two, one..." The AI in the interceptor counted down to the fold jump. Lee gritted his teeth and held on to the armrests of his pilot's seat.

Suddenly Lee was pinned back in his chair. His surroundings started to distort, almost stretching out, like taut bungee cords. Out the front viewing window he saw nothing but a bright, almost blue-white light. The sounds he heard were beyond description. They were never meant to be heard by any living thing, the sounds of time and space bending to manmade will.

Just as suddenly as it had started, Lee and his interceptor came out of the fold jump. It was always a violent event: hence the need for mag bracelets and harnesses. The former commander shot forward against his restraints, then was pulled back to his seat in a whiplash-like movement.

As he tried to quell the nausea in his stomach, Lee looked out his front viewing window again and saw the orange planet, Archeon. It almost looked beautiful, like a big smooth marble, but there was a visible stain that broke up its otherworldly continuity. There was a massive black patch visible even from space.

“Ship, zero in on the Archeon mining base’s landing beacon, take us in,” ordered Lee as he got up from the pilot’s seat. The interceptor’s state-of-the-art operating system followed his command and started their approach to the planet.

Lee walked into the back of the ship. The first thing he needed to do was get changed. According to the readings when the interceptor came out of the fold jump, Archeon didn’t have breathable atmosphere, which wasn’t unusual for a mining planet. Only the miners and their families lived on them, often in enclosed facilities like those found on Earth’s moon.

The first suits worn by the first explorers to leave the Milky Way were clunky and cumbersome, with limited mobility and dexterity. Since then things had become a lot more streamlined. The pants Lee put on were no thicker or more obstructive than snow pants. The torso piece was as light and comfortable as a jacket. The helmet, attached to the torso to keep it airtight, was no bigger than a motorcycle helmet. The entire front half was a strong artificial glass, giving the wearer maximum visibility.

All suited up, Lee moved on to the armory as the interceptor shook and vibrated upon entering Archeon’s atmosphere. He pressed a button, opening up a metal-shutter-covered storage space. Once it opened, he surveyed the weaponry.

Choosing the right weapon was important but not easy. There were plenty of guns and explosives. But Lee knew that if he ran into Shapeless down there—and the odds were good—bullets weren’t going to do a damn thing, so he focused on the explosives. Once loaded up with grenades and charges, Lee searched for anything that shot literal flames, or a cold-cast gun. Neither was in the armory, but there was a shotgun with a choice of shells: flak shells, slugs, or explosive and incendiary rounds. Naturally he chose the explosive and incendiary rounds. Before closing the armory, he

silently thanked the weapons specialist who'd loaded up the interceptor before it was gifted to him.

Lee's stealth interceptor landed with a crunch on the planet's surface. According to the navigation systems, he'd landed one hundred feet away from the defunct mining facility. The loading ramp extended, and the doors opened up.

There was no way to not be struck by the eerie beauty of what Lee was confronted with as soon as he stepped out of the interceptor. Stretched out for miles and miles in every direction, the normally sandy ground of Archeon was glass. Not polished, cleaned, or treated, the glass looked rough, unrefined, almost like silver. It reflected the two suns in the sky, making it hard to see, but was undeniably stunning.

Lee stepped out onto the glass. Unsurprisingly it crunched under his boots. It felt uneasy and strange, as if the ground itself was fragile. The glass was, but under that were meters of piled-up sand.

"Ship, scan for abnormal energy or temperature readings." Before departing the interceptor, Lee had connected his HUD to the ship's operating system. He wanted to find that Herald Stone as quickly as possible and get off Archeon with that same haste. The faster he retrieved the weapon, the sooner he'd get to blow the Shapeless back to whatever hell they'd come from.

"I've detected a disturbance of this planet's magnetic fields," reported the interceptor's AI.

"Place it as a waypoint and display on my visor," ordered Lee. In a second a holographic path was laid out for him via his visor. All he had to do was follow the glowing neon-green line to its end, and that was where he'd find the Herald Stone.

With each step, each crunch, Lee's heart rate rose. He had no idea what was going to be waiting for him, but chances were it wasn't good. Just to be safe, he checked his newly-acquired shotgun and made sure it was armed.

It was a strange feeling, being so nervous and scared in broad daylight, though it was a healthy fear. Lee had both witnessed and literally physically felt what the Shapeless could do. He'd have to be a fool or suicidal not to be on edge, and it wasn't long until his fears started to be confirmed.

About one hundred and fifty yards from the AIC stealth interceptor was a mass graveyard. Hundreds of skeletons, human skeletons, were stuck in odd anguished-looking positions, half-buried and encased in the glass.

Arms, hand, faces, and legs stuck out of the shining ground. And in the distance, peeking over a hill, a sand dune was the top of what looked like a black obelisk.

Lee cringed with each step, worried he was stepping on a body. He looked down to help prevent that very thing from happening and noticed something odd—odder than skeletons half-encased in glass. He saw that the reflection of Archeon's suns was gone. Instead, there was what looked like gray storm clouds. But when he looked up, he still saw a clear sunny sky.

"Ship, scan for lifeforms," ordered Lee as he continued up the glass-covered sand dune, boots sinking as if walking in crunchy snow.

"There are one million five hundred and thirty two lifeforms in a fifty-yard radius around you, sir," answered the operating system.

"Ship, exclude simple one-celled organisms."

"There are thirty-three life forms in a fifty-yard radius, sir."

Is that thirty-three Shapeless? Or other lifeforms?

Lee tried to reason away the possibility of running into the Shapeless. He had the tools to deal with them but still, not having to fight or run from one would've been ideal.

Breathing a little hard in his suit and helmet, Lee reached the top of the sand dune. At the bottom and slightly ahead, he saw the black obelisk that had turned out to be the Herald Stone. Next to it was a rover, the same he'd seen during the mind link. What he hadn't seen before was how big this Herald Stone was. It rivaled a three-story building.

"How am I supposed to attach that to a nuke?" Lee had a bit of a problem to solve. There was no way he could transport the whole Herald Stone, let alone attach it to a weapon. So how could he still utilize it?

You're going to have to break off the biggest chunk you can.

He had enough firepower on him to blow the stone to high hell. But he'd settle for blowing off a piece.

Lee kept walking towards the Herald Stone. As he got closer, he noticed two things. One, the glass was more firm, stronger, the closer he got. And two, there wasn't sand underneath. There was a pond of black oil, constantly moving, oozing.

Knowing what the black oil was, Lee was careful not to break the glass. If he could get off the planet with the Herald Stone and without running into any of the Shapeless, he'd be happy. Still, he knew that when it came to

those aliens, one had to expect the unexpected. He took out and held a grenade in his hand, ready to arm and use it.

Lee reached the Herald Stone. It was full of little holes, porous like a sponge. He didn't notice until then, because he'd never gotten close enough, that there was writing etched into the stone between the holes.

"Ship, capture frames on timer for thirty seconds." Lee instructed the stealth interceptor to connect to his suit's helmet and take pictures of everything he was seeing. He figured if nothing else—even if his mission failed—he could send these images to the UEF and AIC and maybe, just maybe, translated, those writings had a key hidden in them to beat the Shapeless.

Out of nowhere there was a loud ringing noise. Everything within Lee's helmet started to go haywire. The digital display was obstructed by static, including the bars that indicated how much air and power he had left.

"What the hell is wrong with this thing?" Lee, perhaps recklessly, tapped on his helmet with the grenade in his hand. He asked the question even though he knew what it most likely was: either the stone itself, or the creatures that lived within and around it.

Something undefined, something that Lee couldn't quite put his finger on, urged him to touch the Herald Stone. It overwhelmed reason and logic. He dropped the grenade, not noticing that its impact cracked the glass below.

With his now free hand, Lee reached out for the Herald Stone. He didn't withdraw it even when he saw the black oil oozing out of the holes, moving in globs on its own. Something told him he had to touch it.

Lee was surprised when his finger touched the Herald Stone. Part of it just crumbled off. It wasn't the fragility of the massive rock that was necessarily surprising; it was the fact that, at the same time, it was solid. When he tried pushing his finger in, he was quickly met with dense resistance. Nothing he knew of had those properties or felt that way.

Fascinated by the Herald Stone, Lee didn't realize that he'd picked up a passenger, at least not at first. One of the black globs of oil had slithered onto his hand. It wasn't until he spotted it, and it grew in the blink of an eye and started to squeeze his hand, that the former captain realized he was in trouble.

"Shit!" Lee yelled aloud as he backed away from the Herald Stone. He backed up right into the cracks in the glassy ground that his own dropped

grenade had made. It broke, and his left foot sank into the black oil beneath.

Lee was really in trouble, and he knew it. Not only was the Shapeless black oil enveloping his hand, it sneaked up and over his left foot, slowly making its way up his leg. He had to calm down so he could think of a way to get himself out of this terrible situation.

Step one was to control his breath. Lee was breathing heavily, hard and fast, as the black oil spread. He called upon his training and experience as a soldier and officer.

Once his breathing was under control, Lee assessed his situation. His ship was over a hundred yards away. If he didn't get that Shapeless oil off him, he was as good as dead. And he still needed to get at least a large chunk of the Herald Stone back to his ship, and then off-planet.

When nothing more clever came to mind, he aimed his shotgun down at the hole in the glass his foot had made and started firing.

Incendiary rounds, explosive shells laced with white phosphorus, barreled out of Lee's shotgun, bursting apart when they hit the black oil. With each shot the pond of oil got more and more agitated; its whole surface started violently vibrating. The spot where the shells made their impact dried up and hardened.

In response to their insidious little world being disturbed, full-grown Shapeless burst out of the glass ground all around Lee. That he hadn't counted on, but he was ready to fight. First, he took the still-hot barrel of his shotgun and pressed it against the oil on his hand, making it shriek and fall off. Then he did the same to the alien substance on his leg.

Free from the oil on his body, but far from free from safety, Lee was in fight mode, which he liked. He was still angry, and had to take it out on someone or something.

Lee tossed three grenades, each in a separate direction, as he ran toward his ship. It was odd. His body felt young again. Gone were the aches and pains that he'd picked up. Gone was the stiffness and loss of flexibility that came naturally with age. Why hadn't he noticed this before, and how was it possible? At the moment those two questions were stowed away. He had some fighting to do.

The three grenades exploded, keeping some of the Shapeless chasing after Lee off his back. It wasn't a permanent solution, but a way to keep the monsters at bay so he could focus on the ones in front of him and make his way back to his ship.

More Shapeless burst up out of the glass. One was right in front of Lee, sending him sliding backwards. He aimed his shotgun and fired an incendiary round into the newly arrived monster's wide, shrieking mouth.

It became apparent to Lee that he was outnumbered as more and more Shapeless burst up out of the glass. He wasn't going to make it back to the ship, the interceptor. As was often the case in war, he had to come up with a new plan.

"Ship! Start automatic takeoff procedures! Hone in on my—" Lee was in the middle of ordering the interceptor to come pick him up when he was interrupted by a Shapeless taking a swing at him with an arm lined with organic spikes.

Lee managed to duck the attempted impaling. He fired an incendiary round into the offender's chest, but it was in such a strange unearthly shape that he didn't know what to call where he hit. It killed the monster, but the problem with being outnumbered was that he had to defend himself from attacks coming from all sides, which of course was impossible.

Lee didn't hear the initial crunch, nor did he feel it. But when the Shapeless monster who'd managed to get his free arm in its mouth started to thrash, oh, he definitely felt it.

The pain was indescribable as Lee screamed out in agony. Then with one hard turn of its head, the Shapeless ripped off Lee's arm just above the elbow. His blood splattered onto the glass below as he looked at the ragged meat-and-bone stump that used to be his left arm.

Lee took care of the Shapeless that took his arm by emptying his last three incendiary shells into it. It fell, writhing, shrieking, its body drying up and cracking as it died. Knowing that he was thoroughly screwed, Lee took out two white phosphorus grenades, his last ones, and armed them.

In order to try and keep the alien monsters back, Lee made sure to position the grenades around them as they burned. Too scared to get singed, the Shapeless stayed back. Quickly losing blood, the former captain finished summoning his ride. Then he prepared himself for what he knew he had to do, as unpleasant as it would be.

Lee got down on one knee, trying to avoid looking at the pool of his own blood that slid across the slick glass. He put the shotgun down on its butt and leaned it against his bent knee to keep it stable. Then he loaded it up with explosive shells and used his remaining arm to cock it.

With a shaky hand, Lee aimed at the grenade he'd dropped next to the Herald Stone. He fired. And even though he missed, that kind of round left some room for forgiveness.

The grenade near the Herald Stone blew up, taking a good portion of the large rock with it. In fact it, blew it in half. The top part fell into the glass, instantly breaking through it and into the oil.

All the Shapeless around Lee started convulsing, shrieking, rapidly and wildly changing their forms. Recognizing an opening, Lee jumped forward onto his stomach. He crawled a foot or so, held his breath, and then pressed his bloody stump against the bright, still-burning white phosphorus grenade.

Lee managed to simply grit his teeth, wanting nothing more than to scream as his own grenade cauterized his bloody stump. As much as he just wanted to lie there and recover, the grenades only burned for so long. Considering they were the only things holding the Shapeless back, he needed to move.

“Ship, hover two meters above my location, extend loading ramp.” Lee looked up at his AIC stealth interceptor, waiting close by. It followed his orders, extended its loading ramp, and hovered right above his head.

Lee pushed himself up off the glass with one arm. The glass cracked under his weight, all braced on a single hand. Once up on his feet, he jumped, grabbed the ramp, and started to climb.

“Ship, rise three meters.” Lee fought to get the words out as he struggled even harder to climb up aboard his vessel. He wanted to get out of the Shapeless' reach. At first it seemed he succeeded, and had gotten himself out of a situation thought to surely be fatal. Then he felt something grab his leg.

Lee was dragged by the leg by an extended Shapeless tendril. It pulled him off his feet. He landed face-first on the ramp. He just barely hung on with his remaining hand, wrapped around the hydraulic that helped extend and retract the loading ramp. No matter how much he kicked and wiggled, Lee couldn't get out of the Shapeless' grasp, even when he ordered his ship to rise higher. Never one to give up, though, he came up with a new solution.

Lee figured that in order to still hang onto him, the Shapeless must've elongated its tendril by quite a bit at that point. The best soldiers and officers figured out how to use the enemies' advantages against them. That was exactly what he planned to do.

“Ship, pitch right to left, one hundred and eighty degrees, repeat six times. Increase speed with each pitch.” Lee had to hurry. He could feel his grip slipping.

The AIC stealth interceptor was a machine, and always followed orders. It pitched back and forth six times, getting faster with each one, and on the sixth pitch, the Shapeless’ body was lifted off the ground. It anchored itself, but its tendrils, the one holding onto Lee, swung over into the path of the engine exhaust and was burnt to a crisp.

Lee, having not fully thought his plan through, swung back and forth as well with each pitch, somehow, some way hanging on and not being thrown off his own ship. Once the tendrils were burned by the engine exhaust, he was finally free.

With a loud exhausted and thankful sigh, Lee dragged himself aboard and crawled into the interceptor’s pilot seat. He looked out over the ground below, which was now covered in Shapeless, all wanting nothing more than to kill him. The thing was, the feeling was mutual.

Lee did a half loop out and away from the Shapeless, the glass ground, and the Herald Stone. He activated the ship’s weapons systems. They included two large-caliber cannons meant for ship-to-ship combat, and there was a payload of ten missiles and the one nuke. Obviously he’d save the nuke, but a couple of those missiles were definitely going to be utilized.

With a heart full of hate and vengeance, Lee made a run at the Shapeless using an assisted pilot mode to compensate for his missing arm. He opened up on the Shapeless with the cannons, sending glass and alien body parts flying all over the place, but this wasn’t blind violence for violence’s sake. He was clearing them away from the Herald Stone. Missing arm be damned, he wasn’t leaving Archeon without a piece of that rock.

“Extend tow cable,” ordered Lee. A cable fell out from the bottom of the interceptor. On the end of it was a clamp, meant to attach to another ship in distress and pull them to safety. Only in this case, he was going to use it to grab a chunk of the Herald Stone.

Lee carefully lowered his ship. The Shapeless he’d just shredded had already started putting themselves together. He had to be quick.

The tow cable was never meant to be used anywhere other than in space. Little air cannons on it were meant to aim to clamp at the end, so it could grab another ship. Here, with almost Earth gravity, it was a little trickier, but Lee managed. As soon as he saw that the thick steel clamp had

hold of the broken-off piece of the Herald Stone, he ascended up out of harm's way.

“For your troubles.” Lee turned and armed two of the missiles. He fired them straight into the heart of the Shapeless hoard.

Then he flew away.

SEVEN

RETURN TO THE UNDERGROUND

SYDAL RAN AS FAST as he could. Which wasn't very fast at all by normal standards, but considering the bullet wound to his thigh, he was doing pretty well. He needed to be either faster or more clever, though, if he was going to outrun the Shapeless in the station with him.

"Even after becoming one of you, your kind, I still don't understand it," the Shapeless wearing the form of a UEF soldier bellowed to Sydal, his voice echoing in the station as Sydal scrambled for his life.

Sydal wanted to go for the front doors of the LTA station, but he knew that the monster hunting him probably figured that'd be his go-to move. If he went for those doors, he'd be gobbled up before he even reached them. No, he had to be creative. How was he going to get out of here, out of this?

There weren't many options other than the windows, but they weren't easy to get to. By his estimate they were about ten feet off the ground. He wasn't that tall, nor did his old knees have the padding left to jump, though he could get to one across the service station's hangar-like building. How? He'd have to climb up onto a bus and jump from one roof to another until he reached the window that was right above one on the other end.

"You're hurt, tired, I can smell it. Why not just give it up? Relax. All you're doing is delaying the inevitable." As the Shapeless soldier babbled, Sydal climbed. It was hard because he *was* hurt, he *was* tired. But he managed to make it up on top of one of the LTA buses.

Sydal did his best to psyche himself up as he looked at the task ahead of him. There was about a six-foot gap between the buses that he'd have to jump multiple times in order to reach the window on the other end of the service station.

Okay. You got this. Move fast and be careful.

Sydal took as much of a running start as he could and jumped the first gap between buses. His injured leg felt like it was on fire from the time he jumped to his landing. He did his best to ignore it and prepared for the next one.

“Where did you go, little one?” said the Shapeless playfully, like a cat toying with a mouse. Sydal looked around to make sure that it wasn’t close before making the next jump.

The second landing was much harder than the first. That burning pain turned sharp, like getting stabbed with a knife. Sydal almost fell down from the unexpected agony.

“I wonder...” the Shapeless continued.

Sydal heard a loud crunching noise. He looked behind him. A tendril had shot up from the station floor and anchored itself in the ceiling high above. He knew that whatever was happening couldn’t be good. It was imperative that he kept moving.

Now under the clock, Sydal tried to ignore his leg and went for another jump. He really wasn’t ready for this one, though. As soon as his foot hit the top of the next bus, the impact and load of his weight hit his hurt thigh, and he collapsed.

“There you are. Oh no, it looks like you’re hurt.” The Shapeless had lifted itself up along the tendril attached to the ceiling. It hung there in midair, smiling at Sydal with a twisted grin full of beastly teeth. It just barely kept the form of something that resembled a human being at that point.

Sydal pushed himself up to his feet. He looked up at the Shapeless creature, which turned its arm into another tendril, anchored it in the ceiling, and used it like monkey bars, drawing closer and closer.

It doesn’t end here, asshole! Who cares that it hurts.

Sydal had to make three more jumps. Knowing that if he didn’t, he’d be turned into a human kebab by the Shapeless that was after him, certainly helped as far as motivation went. Knowing what to expect as far as pain went when he landed helped him prepare for each one.

Though it hurt like hell, Sydal managed to stay on his feet when he landed on the next bus. Leg shaking, he looked back; the Shapeless quite casually swung towards him like a nonchalant shapeshifting monkey. He had to take advantage of this creature not taking him seriously.

Sydal successfully leaped to the second-to-last bus. His leg did buckle a little, but he managed to stay upright. That was when he saw a possible solution to his alien pursuer problem.

There was a refueling station conveniently in the Shapeless alien's path. It must've been a sign from God, or from the devil. But the detective took out his pistol.

"That's a good little piggy. Finally accepted your fate? Good. It's a good fate. I'll make your transition quick." The Shapeless kept coming, seconds away from being right above the refueling tank.

"I hope your 'transition' is slow," said Sydal, too quietly for anyone but him to hear.

Then he shot the fuel tank.

The tank exploded right as the Shapeless swung over it. The monster let out a terrible shriek so loud it made Sydal's ears ring. It fell from the air, landing in the fire below.

Sydal made a point to stand there and watch the alien burn. Not only was it satisfying to see a monster die, but he saw that it was possible to kill one. All it took was some fire. Though as far as weaknesses went, that wasn't the easiest one to exploit.

Satisfied that the otherworldly creature was dead, Sydal took his time making the last jump. Then he carefully climbed up and out the window in the nearby wall.

Sydal landed as gingerly as possible after jumping out the window. Even then, he still found himself on the ground. Once he got up, he was confronted by the sounds of sirens.

He came to an upsetting conclusion. *Of course someone heard all that gunfire and the explosion. They're coming. You don't have a ride. You're going to have to go back down.*

He needed to go back to the sewers and tunnels under the moon's surface. From there he could go back to Aitken Basin, find a vehicle, and make it to the UEF Army post. It was a bit of a long shot, but there was no chance he'd last much longer aboveground.

Next, Sydal had to figure out how to get back underground. He couldn't emerge from the same spot he'd escaped from before. That was on the other side of the Lunar Dome, and he'd be shot, skewered, or captured before he got there.

“Hey you!” Sydal heard someone shouting at him. He looked over and saw a soldier pointing his rifle at him. But there couldn’t be any surrender. Not until he got Matthew back.

Without putting much thought into it, Sydal shot back as he limped as fast as he could in the opposite direction. Of course the soldier returned fire, forcing the detective to shoot wildly while ducking bullets.

Sydal was thankful in that moment to have lived on the moon for years, because he knew it like the back of his hand, even the industrial sector. He wasn’t blindly limping into alleys or warehouses, hoping that there was an exit or cover. In his mind, he was mapping out a path while trying to avoid getting shot in the back.

As he quickly limped along, Sydal looked for a drainage grate or any access point to the underground. It was his only chance. His haste was made only more desperate with bullets flying by and overhead, hitting the walls and ground around him.

Sydal had to stop for a moment, catch his breath, and maybe wrap a tourniquet or something over his thigh right above his bullet wound. That was hard to do, considering he was being chased, but he knew where he was better than they did. He knew that just up ahead was a water treatment plant. He couldn’t think of a better destination, chock-full of hiding places.

When he reached the water treatment plant, he was surprised to see that the normally locked gates were wide open. He chose to ignore the bloody handprints on said gates and went inside, closing them behind him. At least for the moment, he was safe.

Sydal slumped against the inside of the tall razor-wire-topped concrete walls around the water treatment plant. He was hidden. If all this had occurred just a year earlier, he would’ve had no sanctuary. Those walls had just been chain-link fence with a couple of signs warning against trespassing.

Without many options, Sydal took off his belt. He wrapped it around his thigh, just above his wound, and pulled it tight. It took all he had not to yell out in pain. Instead he just bit his lip to the point that it bled. Once the belt was tight enough, he tied it off and eased his worries about maybe, possibly bleeding out. At least the bullet that had taken a chunk out of him hadn’t hit an artery.

Sweaty, tired, hurting and depressed, Sydal soldiered on after resting only about five minutes. He headed straight towards the first door he saw

that led into the labyrinthine water treatment plant. Confident that no one was watching and he wasn't being followed, he headed inside.

It smelled really bad. But it *was* a water treatment plant, so sewage and waste came through the facility all the time, and at first Sydal wasn't surprised. Under the stench of sewage and grey water, though, he smelled something far more foul. He smelled death.

Having never been here before, Sydal had no idea where he was going—not a clue. He knew what he was looking for, just not where it was. His logic was simple: if this was a water treatment plant, then there had to be access to the sewers, which would give him access to the moon's underground. And if he got lucky, he could find a way into the UEF Army base on the moon without having to drive up to their front doors.

There were signs all around the dark plant. Only the occasional emergency light was on, and small slices of light bled through openings in the pipes. Navigating was hard, but there were signs that helped point the way, holographically projected in his HUD..

To add to the uncomfortable nature of the water treatment plant were the corridors Sydal had to walk down. There was an elevated grated walkway above a series of pipes. There were pipes everywhere, and it was enough to make a person claustrophobic. Add to that the sounds of water rushing through them, and the heat, and for the first time in a very long time, Sydal was happy that he'd chosen to be a cop and had never worked in a place like this.

He caught sight of an illuminated sign that read "Control Room." *That sounds promising.*

Sydal figured there would be a map here he could download to his HUD, a map to the moon's sewer systems. Something like that would tell him if entering the UEF base from below was even an option.

Sydal froze. He heard a sound he really didn't want to. It was a shriek, similar to the one he'd heard come from Fredrich Bausman and the Shapeless he'd burned to death in the LTA station. But was it a monster, or was it simply the natural sounds of the plant playing tricks on his paranoid mind? Sound got so twisted in here. Either way, there was no turning back; it was his only option, so he continued forward.

The water treatment plant's control room consisted of a lot of panels and computers that Sydal had no idea how to even approach, let alone use. There was a wall-sized window that overlooked the rest of the plant,

including a large pool of water. Bodies were littered all around, killed where they were sitting at their posts.

“That explains the smell,” said Sydal out loud to himself as he stepped into the control room. “HUD, search for available networks.”

Sydal tried to connect to anything that would give him access to a map of sewer system. By this time he was so numb from seeing so much death that he simply sat down next to a dead woman on a chair and searched through his HUD.

Bingo! Sydal not only found what he was looking for, but he found something better. With a little snooping, he’d found one of the water treatment plant director’s personal files. Inside that was a navigation system used by workers to find their way through the sewers. He downloaded it to his HUD.

Where is it? Sydal searched desperately through the navigation system for anything that even mentioned the army base. There was nothing.

Then he found the only sewer access hatch without a name or label.

Gotcha! It was outside, on the unprotected lunar surface. There was nothing else it could be.

With his newly acquired map, Sydal was ready to move on. He walked over to the window to take a good look at what was out there and see if there access to the sewers, which he did indeed find. But he also saw something so much worse.

When he first looked out the window, Sydal only saw a pool of questionable water. It was just a glance as he moved on to a more important task. Now that the task was completed he realized that true horror, beyond anything he’d seen at that point, was waiting for him.

At first Sydal had figured the smell that wafted pungently in the air in the water treatment plant was the result of the dead bodies in the control room. While they no doubt contributed to the awful odor, they were just a drop in the bucket of the corpses on site.

How could...who could do...?

Sydal looked on in stupefied awe at the bodies floating in the pool outside the control room. He stared at the pile of bodies right behind it, maybe a hundred, couple hundred large. There was so much blood, dried and still wet, that he thought the floor outside was painted crimson.

Sydal slowly made his way out of the water treatment plant control room, out into the open space, where the pool and the pile of corpses were.

After almost throwing up from the grotesque smell, he hid his nose under the collar of his shirt. It barely helped, probably more mentally than physically.

When he reached the pool, Sydal looked inside. The bloated remains of a mother clutching her baby floated by. He couldn't hold it in anymore. He vomited into the pool and braced himself on the lip.

Sydal started shaking and had to fight to control himself. It wasn't just seeing the dead, bloated mother and child in the pool of water. Everything he'd been through up to that point, how much his life had changed for the tragic in the last few weeks, months, the reality of it caught up with him. His family was gone. His wife was dead, his son probably deceased as well. All that was left was him and the tumor in his brain that wasn't growing fast enough.

The last time Sydal had had a really good deep cry was too far back for him to remember. Yes, he'd cried when his Maria had died, but he'd been so preoccupied trying to comfort and save Matthew that he couldn't let it all out.

Get hold of yourself, Rowan! You need to be strong for Matthew! He still might be out there just waiting for his daddy to save him.

Sydal managed to compose himself. He stared at the pile of dead bodies on the other side of the pool. It was a strange thought, but it bothered him that there were no bugs, no flies buzzing around them. There weren't buzzards flying overhead, ready to pick the meat from the bones. All that death, it was one hundred percent a waste.

Just as Sydal reached the pile of dead bodies, which he needed to pass to continue, he heard footsteps and the clanging of metal. Not wanting to be detected, and end up bolstering a layer of stacked dead, he ducked behind said pile and hoped that whoever was coming through stuck to the other side.

"Why do they always give us these shitty jobs? We're the ones who called the Savors here in the first place. If it wasn't for us, none of this would've have been possible, you know?"

When he heard the voice, Sydal peeked around the side of the pile of bodies and saw three men clad in hazmat suits. All three had hand-held rifle-sized flamethrowers, with tanks of super-compressed flammable gas attached where magazines would go.

"Not sure that was a great idea, Sam," said another one of them.

“You having doubts?” asked the third man, not happy with what he’d just heard.

“No, brother. But I’d rather not have to roast a whole bunch of dead bodies.”

Cultists...good.

While there might have been a little bit of guilt in killing UEF soldiers, Sydal felt no pity or regret at killing a cultist. They’d started this. Justice was for them inside the detective’s gun, waiting to be unleashed.

One of the cultists didn’t feel like chit-chat, and fired his flamethrower at the pile of bodies. Though not as big and intimidating as a stream that came from old-school backpack-mounted flamethrowers, the ones they were armed with were efficient and burned hotter. The pile almost immediately caught fire.

Sydal, much like when he was trapped in the bus earlier, needed to move. He popped up and, without hesitation or a wasted shot, placed a bullet in two of the cultists’ foreheads before they even realized he was there. The third one wanted a fight, though. He shot the flamethrower at Sydal, forcing him to into cover.

“You son of a bitch!” the cultist screamed in the high voice of a young teen.

“You should be happy!” Sydal yelled back. “Hell, thanking me! I sent them to the Abyss!” He wasn’t sure if antagonizing the kid was such a good idea, but this was no soldier and he was hoping to goad him into losing his cool.

“And you’ll be joining them,” the cultist screamed as he turned the corner of the corpse pile where Sydal had run and fired his flamethrower blindly. But Sydal had already scrambled up the pile, then jumped off straight towards him.

The man didn’t have the chance to react. Instead, he just looked on wide-eyed as one of the corpses leaped off the top of a pile and tackled him into the pool, filled with more bodies. He tried to recover, to get back on the offensive, but he dropped his flamethrower upon impact and was disoriented underwater.

Sydal wasn’t at all disoriented. Plus he was still armed, though he had no plans on shooting the cultist. There had to be punishment for what was being done on the moon. Unfortunately for the man in the hazmat suit, it was going to start with him. He wasn’t as young as Sydal had thought from

the voice, but he was still young. Early twenties, probably, and now he looked scared.

With the cultist by the throat, Sydal lifted his head up out of the water and pinned the man against the side of the pool. Rage gave birth to almost superhuman strength as he held him there with one arm and brutally pistol-whipped him in the face with the other. Meant to keep out germs, not protect from blunt trauma, the cultist's mask cracked after the first blow and completely gave way after the second, sending shards of hard, broken plastic into his face.

"You. Sick. Bastards!" In between each blow, Sydal yelled at the cultist in his clutches. "Why? Why? Why? Why?"

Pieces of plastic, skull, blood and brain went everywhere as the detective kept swinging until he was out of breath.

Sydal finally stopped pounding the cultist's face into hamburger and looked around in a daze. All he could hear was sloshing water and his own heavy breathing. The red filter of rage and hatred started to dissipate as he returned to his normal self.

They hate heat. Of course they can't do this themselves. Better make sure I bring those with me.

Sydal climbed out of the pool full of corpses. He calmly picked up two of the flamethrowers. Each had straps that he put over his shoulder, the two forming an "X" on his chest. Before leaving, he finished the job the cultists started. If they weren't going to get the dignity of a grave, at least they wouldn't be left to rot.

Armed with three flamethrowers and a map of the lunar sewer system, Sydal moved on. On the other side of the burning pile of corpses, he found where the cultists came from, and a path underground. He took a deep breath. It was time to go even deeper.

EIGHT

DIPLOMACY

CHEVENKO SAT behind his desk in his office in Europa base and ran his hand through his thinning hair. He went through his HUD, going over his base's provisions, defenses, manpower, and what they were facing just outside the nearby mountains. It wasn't his first time on Jupiter's moon, but it was his first time in charge of its defense.

After the attacks on Vassar-1, the UEF had gone into panic mode. Yes, they had the upper hand as far as resources, money, and ships went, but they weren't ready for an all-out assault, the likes of which hadn't been experienced since the beginning of the Universal Civil War. So naturally, they'd sent the most experienced and capable high-ranking officer available. Unfortunately for Chevenko, that was him.

He saw a video call coming in. It was from Lt. Isaiah—his right-hand man for years, who served as an aide-de-camp—just outside his office.

“What is it, Lieutenant?” There was a fair bit of nastiness in Chevenko's voice. He felt much more comfortable on a ship in space than defending a base. And the last man in his position, a general arrested and court-martialed for alleged cooperation with the enemy, had left Europa base in disarray.

“Your uninvited guests have arrived, sir. Should I have them sent in?”

“Yes, please, thank you, Lieutenant.”

Chevenko didn't even look up when the doors to his office opened. He didn't look at his two guests or the soldiers that escorted them in. Instead, he was studying the holographic map of the land around the base, trying to figure out what to do and where to go if the nearby fleet routed them in the

battle surely to come. They'd pushed them off for the moment, but that was only because Thorne wanted overwhelming odds.

"Sir, former Lieutenant Commander Ben Saito and Senator LeFleur from the AIC Senate," said one of the soldiers that had escorted Ben and his yellow-eyed alien friend to Chevenko's office.

Chevenko barely listened as he stood up. Then he looked at his guests and could hardly believe his eyes. What was Ben Saito, a boy he'd watched grow up, son of one of his best friends, doing on Europa? He wasn't in the military anymore. An even bigger mystery: what was an AIC senator doing here in his office, on the eve of a fight?

"Ben," greeted Chevenko. He shook Ben's artificial hand. "Good to see you."

"Good to see you as well, Admiral. Nice digs you got here. Always wondered how nice an admiral's quarters were," answered Ben as he shook the admiral's hand.

"Well, now you know. Funny seeing you here."

"It's a long story. One I'll tell you, but first—"

LeFleur cut Ben off. "You need to stand down," he said directly.

Chevenko raised one eyebrow. "Come again?"

Ben looked down and shook his head.

"You need to stand down. There's a more important fight than this that you and your men are needed for."

"That so? What fight would that be?"

"The one against the real enemy that plans on invading your planet."

Chevenko nodded his head. Then he turned to Ben. "What the hell is this? What are you doing here? What are you doing here with him?"

"He's...he's telling the truth. Remember way back before I left the service, I tried to tell you about the *Atlas* flying into a trap?"

"I do."

"Turns out I was right. Turns out that my father flew that dreadnaught into a trap, but not into one set by the rebels. No, it was something else, an enemy that none of us knew about."

"What enemy? Pirates? Raiders?"

"An alien threat." Ben cringed inside, waiting to see and hear Chevenko's reaction. They'd already done this song and dance back on Earth, before this had all gotten out of hand. Chevenko had thought he was crazy then, and it was clear his opinion hadn't changed.

“Aliens? Need I remind you, Ben, that over the last couple of hundred years, as man has stretched out into farthest corners of space, we haven’t once run into any intelligent alien species? Now you’re telling me that there’s one out there that was smart enough to set a trap and what...steal AIC ships to take out the *Atlas*?”

“No, yes, and no. It’s...yes, I know that no one has ever reported running into an intelligent alien species, but we all knew there had to—”

“Sorry to cut you off again, Ben Saito. But sometimes it is better to see it rather than explain it,” LeFleur said.

“What are you doing?” asked Chevenko, as he was only a couple feet away from the senator.

LeFleur smiled. Then he started to change. Right in front of one of the highest-ranking military officers in the whole of the UEF, the alien changed its form. Having never seen anything even remotely like it before in his life, Chevenko was stunned into silence.

Chevenko questioned his sanity as he stared face-to-face at himself. He took a couple of steps back and stumbled over his own coffee table. All the while, he kept his eyes on the shapeshifting alien that looked exactly like him, even down to the small, barely-noticeable scar near his temple.

“What is this?” Chevenko tried his best to hide it, but he was shaking. Not out of fear, but the shock of what he saw unloaded adrenaline in his body, and his fight reflex was activated.

Ben walked over and stood above the admiral. He held out his hand for him to take, which the older officer did. Once back up to his feet, still staring at the fake version of himself, he straightened his uniform and tried to stay composed.

“Like I said, aliens,” said Ben.

“This is one of them? One of these aliens you say are going to invade Earth?”

“Well, it is an alien, but one of the good ones.”

“If the fight is on Earth, why are you here?” Chevenko asked.

“Because if the UEF and AIC don’t join forces and race back to Earth, there’s not going to be a home to go to,” explained Ben.

“And you were hoping that since we knew each other, I’d be more receptive to your pleas for unity?” Even though he talked to Ben, Chevenko’s eyes were on the fake version of himself.

“Something like that, yeah. Plus, there’s one other thing.”

“Of course there is. What is it, Ben?”

“I need your permission to leave the base.”

“Okay.”

“And I need a bomber.”

Chevenko wiped his eyes. “You need a...why? Why do you need a bomber?”

“I...” Ben didn’t want to tell Chevenko that he knew where on Europa there was an AIC planet-killing weapon, hidden in a valley not too far from here. Mostly because he didn’t want them or anyone to get their hands on it, but also because there was no doubt in his mind that the Shapeless were going to do everything in their power to locate it. And they were probably going to come for it.

“You’re asking me to gift you a multibillion-credit vehicle right before a battle in which we’ll need every ship we can get. You have to at least give me a reason. Something.”

“What is a piece of technology compared to the survival of your species?” asked the alien, still in Chevenko’s form.

Then he changed back to his original form: a short dark-grey alien with glowing yellow eyes. “Trust me, Admiral, you do not want that.”

“What do you know about what I—” Chevenko was cut off by the yellow-eyed alien, who’d quickly rushed over and grabbed his wrist.

Immediately upon being grabbed, Chevenko seized up. His eyes turned white, and he was clearly no longer in the room with them. His mind was elsewhere, lost in the forced mind link.

“Hey, buddy?” Ben looked over towards the weird little alien. “Bud? What are you doing? Is he...oh, is this that mind-linking thing?”

The yellow-eyed alien didn’t answer.

“I’ll take that as a yes. I’ll just take a seat. Is this going to take very long?”

The yellow-eyed alien let go of Chevenko’s arm. The old admiral breathed heavily, putting his hand on his knees after coming out, eyes back to normal but as wide as saucers.

“Admiral? You, uh, you okay?” Ben was going to put his hand on Chevenko’s back to see if he was all right. It was swatted away.

“I’m fine! I...what was that? I saw it all, I saw, oh God, those things are coming for Earth?” Chevenko spoke as if he’d just had a spiritual revelation. In a way, he had.

“I’m sorry, new friend, but that was the quickest way for us to show you. We don’t have much time left,” the yellow-eyed alien apologized.

“How do you know? How much do we have?” asked Chevenko as he stood back up straight.

“Hard to say for sure, but we do not have much time left. They have already started, are on their way. I can feel it.”

“ ‘We’? You’re joining our fight?” Chevenko was surprised.

“That planet I showed you, new friend? The one overrun and destroyed by the Shapeless? That was my planet. I’m all that’s left of my kind, and I won’t stand by as another species gets wiped out by these foul creatures, plus I have grown to like you humans. Primitive as you may be, you have something that my kind did not.”

“And what’s that?” asked Ben.

“Heart, courage, bravery, the desire to stand up and fight instead of submit. That’s all you need.”

“I’m not one to easily give into rousing speeches or flights of hope...” started Chevenko.

“But...?” Ben couldn’t wait to hear the words.

“But I’m inclined to help you. HUD, transfer pilot authority to Ben Saito, user code,” Chevenko looked at Ben. “What’s your user code?”

“Eight, two, Bravo, Tango, five, Charlie.”

“Transfer pilot authority to eight, two, Bravo, Tango, five, Charlie. I’m giving you what you want, a ship, a bomber. When you get down to the hangar, make sure you let them know that I authorized it, show them the pilot authorization. Go, destroy that weapon.”

“What are you going to do?” asked Ben.

“I have to figure out a way to convince Thorne out there that we’re not looking for a fight. I’ve got to convince him to stand down. Then I have to get him and his fleet to agree to come with us to Earth to kill shapeshifting aliens and stop them from invading our home. I’m not looking forward to any of this.”

“You should take *him* with you.” Ben put his hand on the yellow-eyed alien’s head. “Maybe not in this form, but if he could convince you of what needs to be done, he might be able to do the same for the others.”

“I would be happy to help.”

Ben knelt down so he was at eye level with the alien. “Thank you, for everything.”

“The planet hasn’t been saved yet, Ben Saito. Hurry!”

“Wait! Ben, before you go.” Chevenko caught Ben before he left his office.

“Yeah?”

“Your father, is he...”

Ben didn’t know how to answer. He could’ve told Chevenko that his father was dead. It would make things a whole lot less complicated. But that was dishonest, and the admiral was his dad’s friend. And a man like Lee, or Chevenko for that matter, didn’t have many of those. Not really.

“He’s alive. For now,” truthfully answered Ben.

“He’s out there taking the fight to them, isn’t he?” asked Chevenko.

Ben smiled. “Of course he is. Where else would he be?” He didn’t force that smile. It was naturally born from relief that Chevenko didn’t ask any more questions. He didn’t question his father’s honor, ask if Lee was a traitor, a coward, or a deserter.

“No one I would trust more to save our asses. Take care, Ben, I mean it. Oh, almost forgot. I think my men captured some of our friends. Have them down in the brig. I’ll send word you’re coming down to fetch them.”

Ben was stunned. “Wait, do you mean—” He was cut off by blaring sirens.

Chevenko saw an urgent video call in his HUD. He answered it. “Are they inbound?” the senior officer asked, knowing the answer full well.

“Damn,” he said to himself, then locked eyes with Ben. “Go! Get your friends and get out of here before they have us surrounded. Good luck. Lieutenant, raise shields and contact the reserves back at Aurora Point.” Chevenko very briefly put his hand on Ben’s shoulder on his way out of the office. The yellow-eyed alien followed after him.

Ben ran through the halls of the base as fast as he could. The going was tough, though. UEF soldiers scrambled to get their gear and make their way to their posts, not caring much about anything but their own haste. He bumped, squeezed, and dodged his way to the staircase, figuring the wait for the elevators could be a while.

Ben emerged from the stairwell in the basement level. A couple of men and women, soldiers, ran right past him as he tried to find his way to the cells.

“WHAT DO YOU THINK IS HAPPENING?” asked Wan. He pressed his ear against the clear metal-plastic wall of the prison cell.

“I’m guessing that big fleet that was chasing us was on their way here,” answered Clarissa. She turned to no one. “Yeah, no, he *is* an idiot.”

“*I’m* an idiot?” Wan asked. “You guys are the reason we’re even on this shit pile of a moon.”

“Be quiet,” said Ada as she lay on the floor, her own jacket over her head.

“Come on, Captain. Give us a break,” agreed Congo.

“Sorry to interrupt your beauty sleep, Your Highness, but if you haven’t noticed, we’re a little screwed here,” Wan said.

“Just please shut up and let me think.”

“Think about what? I didn’t know you were an escape artist. Seems like a good skill to mention when you’re locked in a prison cell with other people.”

“Yeah, those are attack sirens. There’s no way this base will be able to stand up to that fleet. And we’ll get buried under thousands of tons of rubble.” Clarissa pointed out the depressing obvious.

A group of UEF soldiers ran down the basement halls, right past the opening to the brig.

“Hey! Hey! You! Let us out of here!” yelled Wan. “Or just ignore me, that’s okay!”

“They can’t hear you,” said Congo.

Ada suddenly sat up. “I got it! I’ve got a plan to get us out of here.”

“I knew you had some brains to go along with all that beauty. Whatcha ya got?” Wan went from upset to excited in an instant.

Ada pointed at the clear cell wall with the main hatch. A UEF soldier stood at it, typing in a code. A second later, it slid open.

“You’re free to go,” said the soldier, a burly middle-aged woman with the look of someone who’d lost a lot reflected in her eyes. “You can help us fight. But I advise that you run.”

“Thank you, kind angel soldier lady. She’s right. Let’s get the hell out of here!” Wan was the first out the door. Clarissa and Ada took their time. “What!? Move it!”

“What’s this ‘we’ you’re talking about?” asked Clarissa.

“Whaddaya mean? We’re a team!”

Clarissa turned her head to the side. “I know, I don’t trust him either. We can’t just leave him, though.”

Wan took a step back. “Who the hell is that woman talking to?”

Ada stepped forward and took the lead. “Don’t worry about it. Let’s go.”

Ada led Wan, Clarissa, and Congo out of the basement. Any kind of map or direction would have helped, but instead there were just endless corridors with storage spaces, different medical facilities, and a massive safe room. She saw a sign pointing to the elevators, and decided that that was the best way to go.

As soon as she turned the corner towards the elevators, Ada literally ran straight into someone. She was going to give some poor jarhead the business when she looked up and saw who it was.

“Ben?”

“Ada!”

It was impossible to tell who was more in shock. But it wasn’t hard to tell they were both happy to see each other, from the furious kiss that ensued.

“So do these two know each other?” asked Wan as he watched Ben and Ada embrace. “Or is this just how the UEF is greeting each other these days? Because I could get behind that.”

“That’s our captain,” answered Clarissa, eyebrows raised. “But he’s never been that excited to see *me*.”

NINE

IN FLAMES

“YOO-HOO, CAPTAIN KISSY,” Wan said as Ada and Ben broke their embrace. “It’s great to meet you and all, but you got a plan to get the hell outta here?”

“As a matter of fact, I do,” Ben said, taking Wan in with one quick up-and-down.

Wan opened his arms. “Damn, I might kiss you next.”

Ben ignored him. “Follow me. We need to get to the hangar.”

“Lead the way.”

As they went up the stairs, Ada and Ben walked side-by-side. Wan, Clarissa, and Congo weren’t far behind. There was so much to talk about, but first came the worst and most obvious conversation.

“We thought you were dead,” explained Ada. “I wanted to come back for you. We wanted to. But—”

“It’s okay. I would’ve been pissed if you did. He would’ve killed you.”

“So did you have to...?” she began.

“No. Thankfully not. I managed to get him back.”

Ada stopped. “You did? That’s amazing! How?”

“It’s a bit of a long story,” Ben said as he waved for her to keep walking. “That I’ll tell you later, I promise. So...LeFay, Tomas?”

Ada looked down at her feet and now it was Ben’s turn to stop walking. Ada opened her mouth but no words came out.

Ben touched her shoulder gently. “Hey, I’m sure you did all you could. If my dad has taught me anything, it’s that you can’t beat, fool, or cheat death. There was nothing you could do.” Ben was upset to hear about his

friends' demise, but he knew there would be time later to remember them, honor them. For now, though, there was still a lot of work to do.

"How about my friends?" Wan asked from the back of the line, a staircase down. "I lost my whole damn crew."

"I'm still here," pointed out Congo, who was just ahead of him.

"Oh, you know what I mean."

"I'm sorry for your loss, Captain. Truly, I am." Ben leaned over the stair railing to reassure Wan. "They died because you helped my friends get here. You helped the mission. None of us, none of humanity will forget their sacrifice when this is all over. You can take my word on that."

"Not gonna take your word on anything. Don't even know who you are," mumbled Wan.

"Fair enough," Ben said. "I hope I can change your mind."

He started up the stairs again. "How did you guys get here, anyway?" Ben asked Ada.

"Captain Asshole there owed LeFay a favor," Ada said, nodding back at Wan as she continued to ascend the stairs alongside Ben. "She cashed in on a ride off Vassar-1. We just barely made it off that graveyard of a planet, only to come here and find it's just as bad, if not worse. At least there it was mostly aliens killing people, not people killing people."

"Yeah, the classics never seem to go out of style, unfortunately. That...I really liked LeFay, quirks aside."

"Me too. She died trying to take on three spider tanks."

Ben laughed. He couldn't help it; it just came out. "Sounds about right."

"You shouldn't say that she 'tried to'," added Clarissa. "She took them out. Craziest thing I've ever seen. Seriously."

"Sorry, Clarissa," Ben said. "I know you knew her best."

Now it was Clarissa's turn to laugh, if ruefully. "I knew her well enough to know that she wouldn't have wanted to go out any other way."

BEN LED the others from the staircase into the hall just outside the base's hangar. It was pandemonium. Pilots rushed to their ships as engineers checked them out, made sure they were armed and bug-free. All except the two pirates in Ben's group remembered the scene in the bunker before the

battle of Vassar-1. This was like that, but at a much larger scale, as there were almost seventy fighters on base and two dreadnaughts parked out back.

Two giant sliding iron shutter doors were open so ships could take off and join the fight that was just starting. Through one of them, Ben and the others saw the base's plasma shielding doing its job and absorbing the impact from AIC dreadnaught, warship, and battleship cannons. It would block missiles and shells, but could only keep projectiles out. If an AIC fighter decided to kamikaze their way in, they would be unimpeded.

Looking through the opposite hangar's shutter doors, Ben and the others could see two dreadnaughts. One was in the process of taking off. The other was grounded. Ben figured it was reserved for VIPs and high-ranking officers like Chevenko—especially since the outside was covered in reflective panels, meant to work together and render the huge vessel invisible.

“Are we hijacking one of these ships, or do you have one lined up?” asked Wan, hands on his hips, looking around at all the hardware on display.

“I got one lined up.” Ben looked around, knowing full well that he had no idea which one. He needed to find someone to point him in the right direction.

An engineer came running by in front of Ben. Ben grabbed him by the arm, stopping him.

“What're you...What do you want!?” asked the agitated engineer.

“My name is Ben Saito. Admiral Chevenko arranged a bomber for me. I can show you my pilot authorization, if you want.”

“Yeah, no, whatever, man. I gotta go.” The engineer pulled his arm out from Ben's grip. He pointed to the far side of the hangar. “Bombers are over there. Ask them.”

“Thank you!” yelled Ben at the engineer, who ran off to whatever he was in such a hurry to do.

As the group made their way through the mass of UEF military in the hangar, Wan caught up with Ben, and somehow managed to bully Ada out of the way so he could get the man's attention.

“Hey,” Wan said awkwardly.

“Hello.”

“I was wondering, man, if maybe—possibly—you wanted to not take a bomber. I mean, the things are slow, cumbersome, not exactly the fastest or most discreet of ships.”

Wan’s tongue should’ve been forked. “We don’t have much of a choice,” Ben pointed out.

“You know, I can see why you’d think that. But it turns out a criminal such as myself has a few tricks up his sleeve.” Wan looked around to make sure no one was eavesdropping. Of course they weren’t. There were much more important things to pay attention to at the moment.

“Like what?”

“Like access to a UEFIA master key.” Wan referred to a program created by the United Earth Federation Intelligence Agency to allow users to access and crack pilot authorization codes for virtually any vehicle.

“That’s...impressive, Wan, but we need a bomber.”

“For what?”

“To bomb shit, of course,” Ben said.

“How about a corsair? They have a couple parked down there, conveniently enough, right next to the bombers. They can drop bombs too. Plus they got missiles. Double the trouble, double the fun. Am I right?”

Ben actually took a moment to think about it. Chevenko offered the bomber because Ben asked for one, but Wan was right: they were slow, had limited maneuverability, and were oddly shaped, making them stick out like a sore thumb on the battlefield.

The rogue in Ben was intrigued but skeptical. “There’s no way we could get away with that.”

“Leave it to me, Cap. You guys keep going like you’re gonna use whatever shit bomber they have, and I’ll have it in our possession in no time.”

“Okay, let’s say you succeed. Then what?”

“Then I pick you guys up and we ride off into the sunset forever, leaving this shitshow behind.”

“Just that easy, huh? Go for it, man. We’ll be waiting,” urged Ben. He watched as Wan peeled off and went to go steal a corsair.

“Where the hell is he going?” asked Ada after catching up with Ben.

“He said he wanted to steal a better ship than a bomber.”

Ada had a confused look on her face. “But there’s soldiers and shit everywhere. There’s no way he can pull this off. He’ll be stopped, arrested,

maybe worse.”

“He seems really ... confident,” Ben offered.

“Confidence is not one of his failings,” Congo murmured. “Maybe one of his only strengths.”

“He’s on his own,” Ben said. “Come on, I can see the bombers, they’re just ahead.”

WAN REMOVED pieces of clothing as he walked. As much as he treasured his coat, his very expensive coat, it stood out, and his life was worth more to him than how many credits he’d spent on it. He took off pieces of jewelry but didn’t toss those, slipping them into his pocket. Before reaching the area with the corsairs, he grabbed an engineer’s uniform whose owner had taken it off because it was too hot in the hangar.

“Excuse me. Excuse me, sir!” Wan heard a stern voice behind him as he started up the loading ramp onto one of the corsairs. He stopped and turned to see a rather unpleasant-looking man holding a tablet.

“I was assigned to do maintenance on this ship,” answered Wan. He was confident in the simple fact that no machine worked perfectly. Most people, the cogs in a machine like a military-level hangar, knew their jobs, but they rarely knew their coworkers’ jobs, or even who worked alongside them. It was a bet he’d almost always won throughout his criminal career.

“I was under the impression that this ship was already cleared. We were just waiting on the pilot.”

“The pilot is who had me sent. There was an abnormality found in the pre-flight. He noticed it in his HUD, requested maintenance from engineering before he got here,” Wan sighed. “So that’s me.”

The man frowned. Wan wasn’t much for spotting military rank, but he could tell this guy didn’t have much. “I gotta move on this,” Wan said.

“Okay, but hurry up,” the man said at last. “We need these ships out of here as fast as possible.”

“Understood, sir.” Wan sarcastically saluted the soldier and climbed aboard the ship.

“THERE MUST BE some kind of misunderstanding. Admiral Chevenko himself requested a ship put aside for me.” Ben spoke to an engineer near the bombers. Other ships started to lift off, floating above the hangar and patiently waiting their turns to join the fight.

Only two bombers remained. One already had a crew on board and was starting pre-lift off checks. The other was an old raggedy ship with bent and dented armor, looking like it didn’t even run. That was to be Ben’s, it seemed.

“No misunderstanding. This is your ship. Now if you’ll excuse me, I have other ships to prep.” The engineer walked away, leaving Ben, Ada, Clarissa, and Congo with a real pile of junk and no other options.

“All right, well, I wasn’t expecting this,” said Ben.

“I thought you said you two have known each other since you were a kid,” said Congo as she looked at the death trap.

“We have.”

“And he likes you?” asked Clarissa.

“I thought he did.”

“It’s still a ship,” Ada said. “Let’s get it ready to go. Clarissa, you want to pilot this thing?”

“I’ll try.”

“Okay, let’s do—” Ben was about ready to accept it and make the best of it when he heard a loud commotion in the hangar. Engineers and soldiers were waving their hands, looking up at a corsair that slowly hovered just out of their reach, with its landing ramp still deployed.

“That sneaky bastard,” Ada said, looking at the floating corsair with disbelief.

Wan appeared on the corsair’s loading ramp with a wide gold-toothed smile. He was wearing a regulation engineer’s jacket, but it seemed he’d taken the time to put his jewelry back on. Ben didn’t care; he was just happy that the pirate was actually able to deliver when Ben had been certain he couldn’t.

“That’s our new ride, come on!” Ben was the first to go running up to the corsair. It lowered slightly, just enough for Ben to get his mechanical hand on the edge of the ramp.

Ben easily pulled himself up onto the ramp, where a smiling Wan said, “I told you I could do it.”

“You did. We owe you. Now we’ve got to get the others.”

After Ben helped everyone on board the corsair, ignoring the yelling and screaming for them to stop, Clarissa sat in the pilot's chair. Everyone else took their positions in the cockpit, and they were ready to rock and roll.

"I don't think they're very happy you took their ship," pointed out Congo, looking out the cockpit windows at the commotion below.

"I don't think I care," responded Wan. He was eating a packet of peanuts he'd found in the ship's shared space.

"All right, Clarissa. Get us out of here," said Ben as he dropped into the captain's chair. He'd expected an argument from Wan, but he seemed more interested in his snack.

The corsair left the hangar and flew out into the space right in front of the base, covered by the plasma shielding. For a few seconds they got a good eyeful of the battle that had just started, and it looked like a doozy.

What looked to be at least a hundred ships floated just outside the range of the UEF Europa base's anti-air cannons. The bigger ones—the dreadnaughts, warships, and battleships—just kept firing their long-range weaponry: missiles, cannons, and torpedoes. Each impact weakened the shields just a little, but also made it hard for UEF ships to leave the protection of their shields and engage—a factor Ben's crew was about to witness firsthand.

Two fighters emerged from the hangar. At first Ben was a little nervous that they were after him, but then the reality set in that there was a much bigger problem than a stolen ship. The fighters flew right past them, toward the shields.

The first fighter was almost immediately hit as soon as it popped out of the shielding, caught and destroyed by the relentless bombardment. The second fighter fared a little bit better at first, managing to dodge a couple of shells but dodging its way into the path of a missile that destroyed it instantly.

"Yeah, I'm well aware of how dangerous this is going to be." Clarissa turned to her side, where there wasn't a chair or a member of her group. "I'm going to do it anyway. As much as I want to, baby, you're gonna have to wait a while before I join you."

"Is she...?" asked Wan, nervous that a possibly crazy woman was about to fly them into battle. It didn't help that he'd never seen what she could do behind the sticks.

“Crazy? Maybe. Probably. But at this point, which one of us isn’t?” answered Ben. Clarissa responded by turning around and smiling, which wasn’t comforting at all to Wan.

“I’m not,” responded Wan.

“Me neither...just for the record,” added Congo.

“Trust her. She’s the best pilot I’ve ever met, and there’s no one I’d trust more to get us through—” Suddenly Ben and the rest of the crew were pinned back in their seats due to the gravitational forces produced from Clarissa taking the ship low—really low—close to the ground, and punching the thrusters.

Clarissa saw the only way to avoid the bombardment as choosing to fly out under it. That presented its own problems, though. Outside the base were twisting mountain passes, and a narrow road meant to make ground-force movement hard and limiting, and in no way meant to be flown through. But she was far from the average pilot.

The black soil and dust of the European surface was kicked up as the corsair’s engines propelled it through the narrow mountain path. Clarissa was almost ready to pull up and join the fight proper when she and everyone else on board saw something that made their hearts sink.

At first, everyone in the UEF Europa base, including Ben and the others, had thought this was going to be a siege situation. Or the AIC fleet would just do the job from the air, keeping casualties to a minimum. But everyone in the cockpit saw a gigantic ground force slowly making their way towards the base.

Ada—still so angry about losing so many of her friends, and knowing that her fellow soldiers would be doomed if the AIC soldiers, spider tanks, and war cannons reached the base—unloaded. With control over the weapons systems, she opened fire with the corsair’s cannons, ripping the enemy units to shreds as Clarissa flew over them.

“Those shields aren’t going to stop them from getting in!” Ben was as worried as Ada, since both of them were former UEF soldiers. Seeing their own die still bothered them, still made them feel guilty.

“Then we’ll come around for another run,” responded Clarissa. If she had any issues with firing on AIC forces, she kept them to herself.

Clarissa maneuvered the corsair dangerously close to the rocky outcrops of the mountains, trying her best to stay off the radar of the fleet above. She

figured she'd be able to get one more run in, so she'd have to make it count—not to mention that the fleet wouldn't be surprised a second time.

As the corsair turned around, everyone in the cockpit was treated to one hell of a sight. All manner of ordnance collided with the blue plasma shield, causing beautiful ripples, like the most violent of rocks skipping on a pristine lake. Missiles and torpedoes exploded into brilliant balls of flame, spreading out across the surface. But more important than the visual spectacle was what was happening under it.

Taking their cue from the stolen corsair, the UEF ships that followed them out of the hangar stayed low before ascending and going after the AIC ships. They avoided the bombardment as well, causing the scale of the battle to grow and giving them a chance to fight back.

Sure enough, when Clarissa came back around and went in for a second run, the ground forces were ready. All manner of gunfire, from the soldiers to the tanks, came up at the corsair. Though it all bounced off the corsair's shields, it was unnerving, but she didn't flinch.

“Ada?” said Ben.

“Yeah?”

“Light ‘em up.”

“Yes, sir.” Ada fired all she could at the ground forces, except for a couple of defensive missiles and the bombs. The bombs would be needed later.

To an onlooker, a spectator, the corsair looked like it was slaughtering the AIC ground forces. Dust and body parts flew everywhere, as the large rounds shot from the ship's cannons were meant for ship-to-ship combat, not meant to be used on humans. One of the missiles Ada fired clipped a tank and blew the soldiers around it to hell. But even with all that carnage, the vast majority of the forces survived—and going around for another run wasn't going to be possible, as they soon discovered.

The fleet high above, getting calls from their ground forces and seeing the carnage below, deployed their fighters. In a matter of minutes, a swarm of them descended upon their UEF counterparts and the group's corsair. The fight was very much on.

“The cavalry's arrived. Get us out of here, Clarissa,” ordered Ben as he saw the mass of fighter ships on the radar. “We've got a job to do.”

CLARISSA PULLED the corsair up away from the AIC ground forces. She headed straight upwards towards the fleet and the swarm. Right before they got in range of the fighters, she turned hard to the left, back towards the Europa base.

As Clarissa did her best not to get hit, Ben saw an incoming video call on his HUD. It was from Chevenko, who must've heard about the grand theft spaceship. He decided not to answer.

“Did you put in the coordinates?” asked Ben. It was Clarissa who'd told him where the AIC hid their planet-killing weapon on Europa.

“On our way now. Just gotta—” The corsair's shields absorbed a hit from a missile from behind. “Let's squash some bugs first.”

Clarissa did a loop, starting with a sharp turn up and around, then behind the AIC fighter that hit them with that missile. She sprayed it with cannon fire until she made a hole in the small ship's much less effective shield. Then she finished it off with a missile of her own.

Ben surveyed the skies above the base. What he saw was a disaster waiting to happen. From his time in the military, he knew that those shields around the base weren't meant to absorb as much damage as was raining down on them. He knew that the UEF fighters that had been deployed were just a Band-Aid on a gushing wound. And he knew that once those tanks and war cannons reached the front doors of the base, it was only a matter of time until they made their way through. And that was if none of them were armed with laser cutters, though he was sure they were.

“They're screwed, aren't they?” Wan saw the same thing Ben did. For all his goofiness and his penchant for being an asshole, the pirate had survived much longer than most. Even without military training, he knew that the situation for the UEF was hopeless. They just weren't prepared.

Ben didn't answer. He focused on the task at hand. “How far is it?”

Clarissa's attention was on survival and fighting. With the agility and grace of a bird, she piloted the corsair through the dogfighting, trying her best not to engage if she didn't have to. But she had to take a couple of ships out.

One of the ships Clarissa shot down spiraled out of control, penetrated the base's shields, and plowed into the side of the structure. Built into a mountainside, it easily withstood the blow, but it was the first time the shields had been breached.

Clarissa finally got through the chaos and turmoil of the dogfighting and flew away from the Europa base. She flew out into the heart of the seemingly endless mountain range, though she didn't do so alone. Three AIC fighters had decided to follow her.

"We got bogeys on our tail. Going to try and shake them off. Everyone should probably strap in. This is going to be...well, just hang on," warned Clarissa before taking a steep dive down into the mountains.

Staying just close enough to be a hard target and not crash, Clarissa made the corsair hug the rock. The AIC fighters, wary of getting that close, kept back and tried to hit them from a distance.

Pieces of rock hit and bounced off the corsair's shields as the AIC fighter's bullet missed and hit the mountainside. Clarissa pulled on the air brake, bringing the corsair to a hard stop. As she turned, Ada wildly fired the cannons, not meaning to actually take out any fighters but wanting to back them off. The ship scraped against the mountainside as it turned; then the thrusters were put on full throttle as the vessel sped in the other direction.

"Hey, Wan, mind getting on those rear cannons?" asked Ben as they sped in the opposite direction from the AIC fighters, knowing full well that they'd turn and follow.

"Yeah, no problem, Cap. Right away. Aye, sir," Wan said insincerely as he got up and made his way to another console that controlled the rear cannons.

Clarissa piloted through the canyons and valleys at a speed that most couldn't follow. The AIC fighters were faster, however, smaller, and were able to keep up. It would take some tricks or some good shooting from the pirate to get the crew out of this jam.

It had been a while since Wan had used any cannon on a spaceship. Back on the *Orion*, he'd almost never had to; he had people for that, so he was a bit rusty. His first dozen shots completely missed the pursuing AIC ships, and the visual of the rushing rock and dramatic topography made things harder. Add to that Clarissa's penchant for moving just before the ship hit something, which meant that it was anything but steady.

Wan missed another shot. "Son of a...!"

"You okay over there?" asked Ben as he noticed that none of the three fighters had been dealt with yet.

“I’m fine!” answered Wan. “These little assholes just need to keep still so I can kill ‘em.”

“I can give it a go,” offered Congo.

“I got it!” snapped Wan.

“Yeah, well, get it sooner, because these bastards aren’t giving up,” Ben ordered.

“ ‘Yeah, well, get it sooner, because these bastards aren’t giving up’.” Wan quietly mocked Ben in the most childish way possible, with an exaggerated, whiny voice. “Okay, prove to these assholes why you’re the Golden Lion.”

Wan took his time and saw how the AIC fighters flew, their pattern. Then he placed a couple of shots where he thought they would be, and *voilà!* He hit one, sending it careening into the mountainside, creating a satisfying explosion.

“Woooo! There we go! One down! Two to—”

Not willing to just let themselves be picked off, the fighters focused their fire on the rear cannons. Ship shields were a little different than the plasma ones found around a structure like the Europa base. Though also reactionary, the shielding system redirected and redistributed its energy to where the threat was. But if enough shots were placed in the exact same spot, something would get through.

That was exactly what happened.

The rear cannon assembly took a direct hit. Wan tried his best to regain control, but they didn’t respond. They were no longer an option. And since the fighter now knew how to beat the corsair’s shields, they were in a lot more danger.

“Okay, screw this.” Clarissa had had enough. She’d thought she could shake them, but she couldn’t, so she decided to take drastic measures. “You guys trust me?”

Ben and Congo looked at each other for a moment. It was a weird question to hear from your pilot, the person who had your life in her hands.

“I guess,” answered Congo.

“Yes,” answered Ben.

“Of course,” answered Ada.

“Hell no,” answered Wan.

“Good. Forgive me if I end up killing us,” said Clarissa as she took the ship right down to the deck. She wasn’t sure he’d ever flown this low in a

ship this big, but decided now wasn't the time to admit that to everyone.

She turned the ship to the side so that its belly was facing to port, its roof to starboard, and its right wing almost scraped the ground of the valley they were flying through.

Clarissa was aiming for a narrow pass that bisected one of the mountains ahead. It was going to be a tight squeeze. If she was being honest, she'd say she wasn't sure if they could safely make it or not. Still, she was going to try.

"What're you, we're not going to, you're not going to...?" Wan started to panic when he saw what Clarissa was about to attempt.

"I wish I didn't trust you," Ben half-joked.

"You got this," Ada said, sounding like she didn't believe it at all.

It was a very tight squeeze. So tight, in fact, that the shields were put to a real test, trying to protect the parts of the corsair that would've been scraping against both sides. There was a loud grinding noise in the cockpit that just added to the nerves.

Ben stopped looking out the cockpit window and focused on two things. He kept an eye on the shields, watching the bar measuring their power quickly go down. He also kept his eye on the radar, which showed the two remaining fighters following them into the tight chasm.

"We can't do this much longer," Ben warned, his eyes on the shields. One portion of the shields went down, exposing the corsair's bottom to one side of the chasm, shaking the whole ship.

"Hey, idiots! We need to get out of here, the bottom of the ship is going to be torn to shreds. If it gets punctured, we won't be able to leave this shit moon."

Ada glanced at Clarissa. For once, Wan wasn't just whining to hear himself whine. He was right to worry about the ship's integrity. Too much damage could leave them without a way to exit the atmosphere. The concern was made more real when a piece of the ship came off, snagged by a gnarled, rocky outcropping.

The corsair suffered a big jolt after losing the panel on its bottom. It almost made Clarissa lose her grip on the sticks. She managed to keep control, though it was clear she needed to get out of that chasm.

"Just a little further," Clarissa said. "It looks like it opens up just ahead." She had a plan. The chasm appeared to end in an open space ahead, marked by bright light. If she could just get there, they would have the

positional advantage over the pursuing fighters who had a much easier time navigating through the tight confines.

“Clarissa...” Ben, who had the most faith in her, was starting to get nervous. Through his HUD he could see flashing warnings about the corsair’s integrity. Parts of the bottom of the holographic model had turned red.

“Just a little further.” Clarissa sped up.

“I guess there’s worse ways to go, right?” Wan held onto his seat’s armrests tightly. Blood was rushing to the side of his head that was turned downwards and to the side, like the ship. “At least it’ll be quick.”

“We’re all gonna pass out if we don’t correct course soon,” warned Congo.

Finally the corsair emerged from the chasm. Immediately Clarissa turned it one hundred and eighty degrees. As soon as she was facing the chasm and the AIC fighters flying as fast as they could down it, Ada opened fire.

There was no getting away for the fighters. Taking the gamble of going through that tight passage had paid off for Clarissa and the others, as they had the enemy trapped and helpless. Ada was relentless, and didn’t stop until they saw two explosions and nothing came out of the chasm. The walls on either side collapsed, just to add insult to injury.

The ship was completely silent as they hovered for several seconds. Then Clarissa let out a long breath. “I think we’re safe for the moment.”

Wan gave her a crooked smile. “I never doubted you.”

TEN

APOCALYPSE

“HURRY or I’ll leave you behind!” Chevenko yelled at one of his personal guards. The Marine hastened across the admiral’s office.

Chevenko stepped into his private elevator in Europa base along with four Marines, part of his personal guard. The elevator connected his office to every floor of the facility in case he needed to get away discreetly. All UEF bases had systems like that, to protect senior personnel and officers.

“Sir, your dreadnaught is being prepared right now. It’ll be ready as soon as you get to the hangar, but there’s a problem.”

Chevenko was on a video call with the officer in charge of said hangar. “A problem?”

“Yes, sir. The rebels, their ground forces have breached the shields. Their war cannons are about to start on our doors. I don’t know how long we can hold them off, sir.”

“Hold them off as long as you can. We can’t reach Rhule; pretty sure they’re using some sort of signal jammer. Once we get into orbit I’ll make sure they come down to offer support. You just need to hang on, soldier. Help is coming.”

“Sir, yes sir. Good luck.” With that, the video call ended.

“Sir? We can get a message to Captain Rhule. Nothing is jammed, our communications are working just—”

The Marine was cut off by one of the other Marines in the small elevator with Chevenko, via a knife in his throat. The admiral simply stared at him as he bled out.

“Thought you said all of them were on board, Corporal?” Chevenko thought all of his personal guard were on the same page about what was

going to happen. Apparently one of them wasn't.

"We lost one of ours earlier this week. That guy was a replacement," answered Corporal Kelly, the stabber.

"Too bad. Hate to see a kid like that go so young. Don't bother getting rid of the body. This place is going to be rubble soon," said Chevenko.

Once they reached the hangar, Chevenko and his guards hurried out across the cavernous space to the open sliding back doors. Only about half of the ships there had launched, so most were too busy to notice their commanding officer fleeing.

"Load that thing onto my ship." Chevenko referred to the yellow-eyed alien he'd locked up in the specialized case he'd been given for just such an occasion. It was held by one of his security detail.

As soon as they got on board, Chevenko headed to his quarters. The dreadnaught turned on its stealth features as it lifted off. He logged into the Europa base's main operating system. He used his authorization codes to manually shut down the base's shields.

"HUD, call Anita Lau using a secure line." Chevenko waited patiently for about half a minute as his dreadnaught slipped unseen out of the base towards the atmosphere.

"Good news I presume, Admiral?" Lau appeared in the small video call window, looking annoyed.

"Everything is going as planned. Europa base is about to fall."

"Have the sleepers awakened yet?"

"No, not yet. They told us they'll wait until the other UEF fleet arrives, and destroy as many of them as they can."

"Good. Our preparations here on the moon are almost done. Every ship here is now company property or belongs to the Saviors."

"Do you need me to come there, to the moon?" asked Chevenko.

"Not necessary. We have all the protection we could ever need here. We need you to take that fancy ship of yours—the one we built for you—and go after an old friend of yours."

Chevenko was confused. "Ma'am?"

"Lee Saito. He's become a threat to the Saviors. You need to stop him before he reaches his destination." Lau felt right at home giving commands to Chevenko.

"Consider it done," he said.

“Follow the beacon on his ship. We had an agent activate it. Make sure he doesn’t reach his destination. Then we can talk about your role in the new world. End call.”

“FANCY FLYING,” said Ada as Clarissa pulled the corsair up out of the mountains, now a much safer distance from the rocks.

“More luck than anything,” she demurred.

“We’ll take luck as long as it holds,” Ben said. “Now let’s go bomb some shit.”

“With pleasure.” Clarissa homed in on the spot she’d marked on the map, where the AIC had hidden a potentially planet-killing weapon decades ago.

The weapon was built in a bunker constructed into one of the smaller peaks in Europa’s long mountain ranges. It stood out from the others because it wasn’t just a mountain. Long before man had stepped foot on Jupiter’s moon, before the reclamation process began and the water-ice surface had been converted for vegetation, the small peak was an active volcano. Dormant now, it was ideal, considering the large opening at the summit through which the weapon could easily be lifted out. There would be no lifting now, though. All they wanted to do was bomb it, take it off the table.

“Look at that,” Ada said, nodding back in the same direction as the fighting in and around the UEF base.

When Ben and the others did indeed look, they saw an arriving fleet of AIC ships. It was Rhule.

“Are they here to help or to finish the job?” asked Wan.

“They’re not firing on the base, so...help?” Congo tried to figure it all out as well.

“He knows the score,” Ben said. “He knows what’s behind all this now. The AIC’s fight isn’t with the UEF.”

“But he’s too late,” Ada said.

“What do you mean?” Clarissa asked.

Ben saw she was right. The arrival of Rhule’s fleet was merely delaying the inevitable. “Look. The shields are down,” he said. That glowing blue

transparent layer that surrounded the Europa base was gone. Nowhere to be seen. “Without them, all those ships up there will pummel it into rubble, even with the new arrivals trying to stop them.”

“Shit.” Ada felt guilty. She felt like they’d left the other UEF military to die.

“It sucks, I know, but we need to focus on the task at hand. Then we can talk about helping them.” Ben wanted to go back and help too, but the whole point of coming to Europa was to take out that weapon so that the Shapeless couldn’t obtain and use it.

“Thirty seconds until we reach our target. Preparing bombs, opening bomb bay doors,” said Ada, as it was her job at the weapons station to drop them. Though she had no experience, it was all pretty self-explanatory, and there was more than a little machine assistance.

“Okay. You ready, guys? This is what we came for. This is why we had to fight. This is....”

Ben stopped talking when he and the others saw the same thing.

The top of the hollowed-out volcano in which the AIC’s superweapon was supposed to be housed started to crumble. All around it, the mountains started to shake and break apart. Out from under those mountains rose something gigantic.

“Oh, you’ve got to be shitting me! They’re already here?” Ben couldn’t believe it. A huge, perfectly spherical ship made of churning liquid metal—a Shapeless mother ship—rose from under the ground. Pieces of the mountains themselves fell off, making the deadliest of rain below. The sun shone harshly off the ship’s mirror-like surface, making looking at it almost blinding.

At first neither the AIC nor UEF really knew what was happening. Neither side had seen a Shapeless ship before, not like this. The overwhelming majority of them didn’t know that the aliens existed. But there, on and above Europa, they all saw it for their own eyes. And in a matter of a few seconds, a few minutes, a lot of them were going to die with that knowledge.

“What does this mean? Do they have the weapon?” asked Clarissa.

“I think that’s a safe bet,” answered Ada.

“We need to take it out then, right?” Congo thought the solution was simple. She too had never run into the Shapeless before. Neither had Wan.

“I don’t see any guns or protection. Let’s blow that beautiful marble to kingdom come and be on our way,” Wan said.

“It’s not that easy,” said Ben. “Shit! We need to get out of here. We need to get the others out of here. None of us are ready for this fight.”

Suddenly tens of thousands of sharp-tipped spikes came flying out of the Shapeless mother ship in every direction. Some harmlessly hit the remains of the mountains below, creating mini-craters and kicking up rock and black soil. More of them hit UEF and AIC ships, skewering them, destroying them like kebabs cooked too long over a camp fire. Unprepared, a lot of the smaller and more maneuverable fighter ships flew into the spikes, destroying them all the same.

Ben and the others’ corsair was just out of range of the spikes. Still, Ben felt like the Shapeless ship was staring straight at him, mocking him. He knew deep down that the Pale Man was inside it, planning his next move.

“What....what is this?” Wan was up out of his seat, nose almost touching the viewing window. He looked on in disbelief and awe as the spikes quickly retracted back into the huge undulating liquid-metal sphere that was the Shapeless’ ship.

“This is what we’ve been fighting, what we’ve been trying to warn everyone about.”

“So...that’s an alien ship, huh?” Wan looked at the Shapeless vessel, more fascinated than scared.

The ships that had been impaled fell to Europa’s surface in flaming pieces, crew members freefalling to their doom unless they’d been lucky enough to die in the initial impact. There were too many casualties to count. While the AIC and UEF fleets weren’t completely destroyed, they both suffered major losses. Both of them stopped fighting each other and pulled back to their respective larger support ships.

“What do you want to do?” asked Clarissa, turned around in her pilot’s seat. Her gaze, like all others, was focused on Ben.

Ben had to rack his mind. He had to outthink the Pale Man and the Shapeless. He needed to join what was left of the AIC and UEF together. And in order to do that, he needed to get back to Rhule. Hopefully, once there, he could also regroup with Chevenko and get the message back to Earth that death was coming and they needed to prepare themselves.

Ben ordered his HUD to make the call. “HUD, call Captain Rhule, *Veruvian*.”

“Young Mr. Saito, you’re still alive,” Rhule said matter-of-factly. Ben hadn’t actually expected him to answer. “You’ve got more lives than I thought.”

“We’re still alive, and we need some help.”

“I’ll do what I can, but you’d better hurry. We’re preparing an attack on that thing. Those are the aliens you spoke of, aren’t they?”

“No!” Ben said hurriedly. “Don’t attack it.”

“Like hell we won’t, son. Did you see what I just saw?”

“Conventional weapons will be ineffective, Captain,” Ben said. “This will play out just like it did over Vassar-1.”

Invoking the doomed capital world made Rhule come up short. “This thing was there?”

“It’ll kill all of you if you go rushing in,” Ben continued. “They’re counting on us being angry, making mistakes. They’ll allow you to inflict meaningless damage until you’re fully committed, and then ... Trust me, I know these things. If you want revenge, we need to regroup, get a message to Earth about what’s coming, and join up with Commodore Thorne and the AIC.”

Rhule was silent for a moment. “That’s a lot to ask, son.”

“I’m not asking, Captain! I’m telling you, this has to happen or all of our families, our friends, all of Earth is going to be in flames. I’m talking a goddamn apocalypse!”

Rhule didn’t answer for a few seconds. “Where are you?”

“We’re in a corsair. We’re coming to you now.”

“Okay. No promises, but I’ll put in the call to Earth right now. They’ve seen what we’ve seen here.” He rubbed his chin. “Not that they’re going to be much excited to hear from me. Did you talk to the admiral?”

“I did,” Ben said. “I think he understands. I think he can convince the UEF.”

“Very well. Hurry up. It sounds like we don’t have time to spare. HUD, end call.”

“We’re in business,” Ben said. “Clarissa, take us to the *Veruvian*. I’ve entered in their beacon. Let’s get out of here.”

“We’re just going to leave it, let them take the weapon?” Ada said doubtfully.

“We don’t even know if they have it. All we know is....what is it doing?” Something caught Ben’s attention.

The spherical Shapeless ship rose up slightly in the air, above where the two fleets held their positions. An opening appeared in the bottom of the otherworldly alien vessel. Out of it emerged what looked like a very, very large dish with an extended central tower.

The corsair's instruments instantly registered a huge power spike.

"Shit!" Clarissa knew what she was looking at. They needed to get as high up as possible, so she flew as fast as she could upwards and towards the *Veruvian*.

"What is it?" asked Wan.

"It's the weapon! They're about to use it!"

The gigantic dish that jutted out of the Shapeless' mother ship lit up a bright orange. It was as bright as the sun before a huge beam of energy came flying out of a point that floated just beyond the forward tower in the center of the dish and towards Europa's surface. The power was so daunting that even before the beam hit the ground, a crater started to form. That crater turned into a deep, deep hole as the beam's energy punched through it.

Ben felt his jaw drop open. Nobody else spoke.

The UEF fleet immediately broke off the fight with the AIC forces and started to ascend away from the planet at top speed. But incredibly it was the AIC ships, with the exception of the commanding dreadnaught, that went into full attack mode.

"Those idiots! What the hell are they doing!?" Ben watched the AIC attack incredulously.

Thirty seconds after the huge orange energy beam hit the Europa surface, the whole moon started to shake. Molten rock started spilling out the cracks the beam's impact had created. The tops of mountains explosively flew off, sending magma plumes high into the air. Like the biggest earthquake ever, the whole surface of Jupiter's moon fractured, cracked and split apart.

Swallowed by fire, super-heated rocks, and gases, the attacking AIC fleet disappeared along with the Shapeless ship. Ben and the others didn't stick around to watch a moon die. They needed to survive, and in order to do so they needed to reach the *Veruvian* as fast as possible.

Clarissa had her work cut out for her, flying through a moon-sized erupting volcano that was already wreaking havoc with the local gravity. As she did her best to dodge magma, super-heated gas, and gigantic rocks

thrown about at the velocity of bullets, Ben and Ada's minds and attentions were focused on something else entirely.

Both Ben and Ada, with strong ties to the UEF military, looked on in horror as the base crumbled and was enveloped by a rolling cloud of gas and rock. Both were silent as they knew that every single last soul stationed there was surely dead.

As nimble and skilled a pilot as Clarissa was, there was just too much debris in the skies to completely avoid. The sun had been blocked out by the planetwide volcanic cloud that quickly spread, and it was hard to navigate safely. She used all the tricks she could, but she didn't catch a large boulder that flew up towards the corsair from below.

Everyone in the cockpit was surprised when the large airborne boulder hit one of the corsair's wings. Clarissa struggled to keep control of the vessel as it spun side-over-side. The piloting stick threatened to wrestle itself out of her control as the contents of everyone's stomachs threatened to spill out of their mouths.

Clarissa didn't know what to do. The corsair was spiraling down towards the maelstrom below. It looked as if death was going to be certain. Then she felt another hand over hers on the piloting stick. It was warm, comforting, familiar. It was Blake's hand. With his added strength, or perhaps just his encouragement, she managed to right the ship's course and correct it. And she did so just in time, as the bottom of the vessel was kissed by magma before pulling back up.

Perhaps seeing the trouble that the corsair was in, the *Veruvian* moved a little closer to help. Its landing bay was wide open, waiting to welcome Ben and the others, to deliver them from one fight to the next one. Soon enough, Ben knew, it would be the last one.

ELEVEN

AS ABOVE, SO BELOW

SYDAL WAS thankful that the flamethrowers he'd picked up from those cultists he'd killed a lights on them. Otherwise, even with his map, he would've been lost in those dark sewer tunnels. Combine the dark with the smell, the dampness and the tighter confines, and he wished for the tunnels he'd barely escaped after Aitken Basin.

According to the holographic map he'd acquired from the water treatment plant, the sewers had several openings and tunnels that branched off from them. One he recognized: it was the tunnel from Aitken to the Lunar Dome. He didn't want that one. Another was a sewer line that connected to the dark side, also unwanted. The third one caught his attention. It connected to a tunnel that went to the exotic matter generator. The EMG fed the Earth's moon its entire power supply. Past that was a tunnel that led to what he figured was a hatch under the UEF military outpost, so the third option it was.

"Who's there!?" Sydal swung around behind him when he heard a loud shriek in the sewer tunnels. He had to hurry. Though he was armed to fight a Shapeless, he had no desire to do so.

Sydal picked up his pace, though the going was slow and hard as his boots were mired in shin-deep grey water and the muck accumulated below. The shrieks got louder, which meant they were getting closer. He kept glancing behind to make sure that he didn't see anything in the flashlight mounted on his flamethrower. Then his attention returned to the sewer tunnel ahead.

According to the holographic map in Sydal's HUD, and the way marker, he wasn't far from where the tunnels branched off towards the EMG. There

was another shriek, and the sound of something moving through the sewer water. It sounded close.

Okay. Screw this, I'm tired of running.

Sydal decided to hold his ground. He turned, aimed his flamethrower down the sewer tunnel in the direction of the noises, and waited. Then his mounted flashlight started to flicker and went out.

“Are you kidding me?” Sydal smacked the side of the flashlight, but nothing. He heard water slosh inside it. That must’ve shorted it out.

There was another shriek. This one was loud, very close. Sydal’s heartbeat shifted into high gear. He aimed his flamethrower towards it and gave the trigger a brief squeeze.

A small ball of flame shot out of Sydal’s flamethrower. In the light he saw a dark shape dive down into the shallow grey water. That was the last thing he wanted to see.

Something wrapped around and grabbed Sydal’s ankle. It was the ankle on his bad leg, which didn’t have the strength to resist the strong pull from the Shapeless. Before he knew it he landed hard on his back, or more accurately on the flamethrowers strapped to his back.

A strong force pinned Sydal’s leg’s down. It was hard to see in the near-pitch dark, but he could feel the trigger of his flamethrower. Not knowing if he’d hit anything, he fired.

Flames cascaded across the arched top of the sewer tunnel. The light revealed a Shapeless right on top of the detective, ready to stab him, but the heat scared it and made the alien retreat.

The ceiling of the sewer tunnel still on fire, Sydal got up out of the water, his ankle twisted and feeling like it was badly sprained or worse.

The fire in the sewer tunnel revealed not one but a whole posse of Shapeless, too scared to move forward under the flames, snarling, gnashing their teeth and shrieking at Sydal. He stared at them for a little while, getting his first calm look at the monsters that were tormenting him and the citizenry of Earth’s moon. They were ugly creatures that always looked like they themselves were in great pain, lashing out against anything that wasn’t. The oily blackness of their being reflected the nearby fires. All of them tried to reach out, but immediately their tendrils and clawed hands retreated once they got a taste of the flames’ heat.

“You guys really are some of the ugliest pieces of shit I’ve ever seen in my life.” Without skipping a beat, the detective stepped forward and

squeezed the trigger of his flamethrower and held it down.

Ignoring the wave of heat that hit him square in the face, even causing burns to the exposed hand that held the flamethrower, Sydal watched, satisfied, as the Shapeless in the sewer tunnel burned. In a matter of thirty seconds or so, they were nothing more than flaming hunks of charred black.

It was a minor victory, but one Sydal desperately needed. He savored it for a moment before remembering that time was an issue. Matthew's life might depend on how fast he moved, so he continued down the sewer tunnels, using his flamethrower to light the way.

When Sydal reached the place where the tunnel branched off, he was relieved to climb up out of the muck and into a small chamber clear of the sewage. There was an airtight bulkhead door that was labeled as the sewer entrance to the generator. He spun it open, and his eyes were assaulted by bright light.

Sydal stepped out into what looked like a hallway with a door on the other end. In between the bulkhead and the far door were a bunch of holes in the wall. The floor was grated. Hazmat suits hung on hooks on the far end near the second door.

Not five feet into walking down the hall, and Sydal was sprayed with water from all sides but below. Suddenly the grated floor made sense as the water, with soap already mixed in, washed the filth of the sewer off him. But the high-pressure hoses hurt, especially when they hit his injured thigh, almost bringing him down to one knee.

A little shocked and soaking wet, Sydal limped on. In another five or six feet, he was hit on almost all sides again by high-powered air jets, drying him off in a matter of seconds. They were so intense he couldn't breathe as they hit his face. Lastly, not ten feet before the second door, the walls themselves turned red and he passed through some intense heat, the last stop in the sterilization process.

Sydal chose to skip the hazmat suit and opened the door at the end of the brightly-lit hallway. What he saw as soon as he opened it was a large, mostly empty room. Bent tubes lined the walls of the room, connected to each other, circling around until they reached the floor. Another pipe from the bottom of the spirals led to a huge cylinder-shaped machine in the middle that went all the way up to the ceiling.

Part of the cylindrical structure in the middle of the generator room was transparent. In that viewing window he could see globs of exotic matter

swirling around each other. Three people were in the room, manning several stations.

“Hey! You’re not supposed to be here!” one man snapped. From the look of them, the uniforms they were wearing, it was clear that they were employed by Waterman-Lau.

“Don’t even think about it!” Sydal kept his flamethrower pointed at the Waterman-Lau employees as he saw one reaching for their sidearm.

“What are you doing here? Who are you?” asked another of the meek Waterman-Lau employees. They kept their hands up in the air, showing that they surrendered.

“Who’s in charge here?” answered Sydal with a question as he limped towards the Waterman-Lau staff.

“I am,” answered one of them.

“Good.” Sydal took out his pistol and shot the other two Waterman-Lau employees in the head. Then he turned his attention to the shaken senior staff member.

“Oh my God!” The remaining man was shaking, but Sydal felt nothing. As far as he was concerned, the cowering man before him was just as bad as the soldiers and the Shapeless, and he saw Waterman-Lau as just as responsible for what had happened and was happening on the moon.

“Transfer controls to my HUD,” ordered Sydal, his pistol pointed directly at the frightened man’s head.

“Transfer....Do you know how to control one of these? How dangerous they are?”

Sydal pressed the still-hot barrel of his pistol into the Waterman-Lau employee’s forehead. It sizzled as it burned the man’s skin.

“Okay, okay. I’ll transfer them now.” The man did as he was told.

“Now, which way to the UEF base?”

“The what?”

The man’s attempt at feigned ignorance was pathetic to Sydal. It practically enraged him. He slammed the man in the head with the pistol.

“There.” The man cowered, holding his head and pointing. “Through that door, down the tunnel about two hundred feet. There’ll be a ladder that leads up to a hatch.”

“Is there a code on that hatch?”

“Three, eight, Delta, Echo.”

“Thanks.”

The man pointed at the generator controls. “Whatever you do, please make sure the collider spins at a consistent level. Because if it doesn’t...”

“Boom, yeah, I get it.” Sydal said. “And now you do, too.”

He shot the man right in the middle of the Waterman-Lau logo on his chest. He stumbled backward, then collapsed.

Sydal looked down at the dead man. Some voice told him that he’d gone too far. That this had been wrong, or at least, not right.

Some part of his humanity was slipping, Sydal knew. He closed his eyes. He didn’t care anymore. He only cared about one thing.

This is it, Matthew. I’m coming for you. Please hang on tight. Daddy’s coming for you.

EPILOGUE

AS HE RODE through the fold jump to his final destination, Lee closed his eyes and thought of home. He thought of the feeling of getting out the shower and climbing into a warm bed. He thought of the smell of his wife's hair on the pillows. He thought of watching his son grow up into the man he was so proud of. He thought of the Earth.

Lee's ship came out of the fold jump. Exiting was always more violent than entering. His body flew forward, only to be pulled back to his seat by the magnetic restraints. When he opened his eyes he saw an asteroid field, and in the middle of it a black ball, a small planet barely visible against the vast darkness of open space.

"Ship, plot a course through this asteroid field towards the unknown planet ahead." Lee unstrapped himself from his seat and headed towards the back of his ship.

Getting the Herald Stone off Archeon had been the easy part. Now Lee had to do the hard part. He had to somehow attach or integrate the alien rock into the nuclear warhead-tipped missiles on board. Hopefully that would be enough to finish off the Shapeless and their home planet.

In no way a weapons expert, Lee pulled up digital schematics on the missile while climbing down into the tight confines of the bomb bay where the extremely destructive weapons were stored.

"Okay, now how the hell am I gonna do this?" Lee realized that this was going to be a lot harder than he'd expected. He hadn't taken into account how he was going to work with the chunk of Herald Stone he'd retrieved from Archeon. It lay in between the two nukes.

Lee figured it would be safe to work with the alien rock. Any traces of the Shapeless that might've once been inside were gone, killed during the trip. At least he hoped that was the case; there was no telling for sure. But the Herald Stone wasn't his main worry. His concern was not blowing himself up as he tried to learn how to take apart a nuclear weapon.

"Attention, user Lee Saito." Lee's ship's operating system alerted him through his HUD. "Incoming vessel."

Shit. I should've known these alien bastards wouldn't just let me stroll up and drop off a couple of nukes.

Lee saw an incoming video call on his HUD. He was surprised to see who was calling.

"Admiral?" Lee answered the video call, further surprised to see his old friend's face in the call window.

"Lee. Old friend. Can't tell you how happy I am to see you. I thought you were dead," said Chevenko.

"I did die. But I got better."

Chevenko forced a laugh. "You always were a stubborn old son of a bitch. Guess death is going to have to wait to claim the likes of you."

"For a little bit, yeah. What are you doing out here?" asked Lee. He climbed out of the bomb bay. Something about his old friend's arrival felt wrong. He couldn't put his finger on why, but something definitely wasn't right.

"I've come to help you," said Chevenko.

Lee returned to the cockpit of his ship. "Help me? That's...well, that's great! But how did you know I was out here? How'd you know where I was?"

"We came here to take down the alien planet. Your son told us where it was."

Lee felt a little chill run down his spine. He saw fighter ships being deployed from Chevenko's dreadnaught.

In that moment it all dawned on him. How the Oblivion cultists had so easily penetrated the UEF base on Annapolis all those months ago. How the Shapeless had known where the Atlas was going to come out of the fold jump. How their existence could go unknown for so long when their first appearance had been on a UEF planet.

Lee looked at the asteroid field that stood between him and the Shapeless' home planet. His grip tightened around the pilot's sticks. The

race was about to begin, and it was one he couldn't lose.

BOOK 9: LAST STAND

ONE

OUTBREAK

DUCAR LOOKED out on the city of Annapolis below while sitting on the edge of the open hovercopter that Oblivion had forcefully acquired two weeks earlier from a UEF depot out in the middle of nowhere. In the copter with him was a cadre of fellow cultists, zealots like himself. All were fully armed, all ready for the mayhem to come.

But Ducar and the other cultists weren't alone in the hovercopter. Taking up the room that could've been reserved for more cultists were canisters filled with an oily black living substance. Freshly delivered from the moon, they were Shapeless, just waiting to be unleashed.

Ducar got an incoming video call: Anita Lau's face appeared in the video call square in his HUD. "You're running late."

"We had a bit of a problem, back outside the base," Ducar was referring to a city sentinel officer who'd just happened upon them when they were loading up the hovercopters. That cop was dead in a gutter.

"A problem?"

"Nothing I couldn't or didn't handle. Other than that, everything is moving forward as planned, ma'am."

"Good. Good. Remember, every officer you can, I need you and your men to kill as many as possible."

"We will. I promise. You can count on us."

Anita Lau ended the call, and right on time. Ducar could see that they were getting close. His group's target was the new officers' building, moved after the Oblivion's attack months earlier, now meant to be hidden in the middle of downtown Annapolis. The other dozen hovercopters in the air with him had their own objectives. Some targeted the city's anti-air

defenses. Others went after the docks scattered around the cityscape. All of them took advantage of the morning smog to stay hidden.

Ducar opened up a holographic picture of his lost love, Vesta. Everything he was about to do wasn't for Anita Lau of Waterman-Lau. It wasn't for the Saviors. It wasn't even for himself. It was all going to be for revenge: revenge for the only woman, only *person* he'd ever truly cared about.

"Okay, let's go. It's zero hour." Ducar ordered all the hovercopters to land and get to work. "Good luck, and I'll see all of you in the Abyss."

"In the Abyss," repeated numerous other zealots, all in charge of their own copters.

Ducar's hovercopter lowered through the smog and landed on top of the Royalty Towers, the new home of Annapolis' and most of the UEF's top military brass. He jumped out, along with six other heavily-armed zealots. They all put on their masks and checked their weapons as their ride flew away.

"Everyone grab a canister. Attach it to your packs, just like we trained for. Don't release them until my order. Understood?" Ducar addressed his men. They all nodded. "We got those doors open yet?"

he asked one member of his team, who was using a stolen all-access key from the dead city sentinel to open all the apartment building's doors at once.

"We're in," answered the more tech-savvy zealot.

"Good. Let's bring these poor ignorant bastards salvation."

Ducar led the way down off the roof and into the Royalty Towers proper. The opening of all the building's doors had the intended effect. On the uppermost floor, the residents stuck their heads out to see what the hell was happening. They were met by Ducar and the zealots, who didn't hesitate to open fire.

After shooting one poor woman in her head, Ducar entered the first apartment he came across. From its size, the décor, and the fact that it was on the top level of this exclusive building, he knew that whoever lived here must've been important. Sure enough, after seeing what was his wife get shot, a UEF general came out of his bedroom, pistol in hand, firing and cursing at the heavily-armored zealot.

Bullets hit, but were absorbed and bounced off Ducar's high-density dragon-weave Kevlar armor, which covered almost his whole body. He

callously shot the general in the chest, then walked over to him on the floor and fired again to make sure he was dead.

He heard kids crying from the other room. His work wasn't done in this apartment.

Covered in blood, Ducar left the first apartment and reentered the hallway. He was numb to the cries for mercy, the gunshots and screaming. To him this wasn't murder; this wasn't a slaughter. To him this was a mercy, a release from a world of pain and suffering. To him it was also vengeance.

Ignoring the chaos around him, Ducar walked towards a door at the end of the hall. One of his fellow zealots was posted up by the doorway, looking to avoid semi-automatic gunfire coming from within the apartment. Ducar calmly approached, not taking any precautions against getting shot.

On the way, Ducar passed open doorways where true nightmares were taking place. The zealots had been chosen not only for the strength of their beliefs, but for their brutality in following through with them. Men, women, children, even pets: no one and nothing was spared as they went room to room, shooting anything that moved.

"This bastard's dug in deep, sir!" yelled the zealot pinned down outside the open door.

"Not a problem." Ducar dropped down to one knee. He reached to his back, where one of the canisters was attached to his backpack. After taking it off, he looked at it for a minute, transfixed by the beauty of what was inside. A button press and a turn of the lid later, and the canister opened up.

Ducar happily watched as the living black oil jumped out of the canister. It grew in size tenfold, until it was a little larger than an adult human. Tendrils, spikes, and blades waving around in all directions, its razor-sharp tooth-lined mouth let out a loud shriek before it rushed into the apartment.

It wasn't until he heard screams of horror and pain that Ducar entered the apartment. For a moment he watched as the Shapeless he'd unleashed savagely ripped a general and his family to pieces. He moved on to the wall-sized windows in the family room.

Ducar was pleased with what he saw. There were fires, freshly lit, all over the Annapolis skyline. A couple of explosions marked the successful destruction of some planetary anti-air guns. Emergency sirens could be heard even through the thick glass. Panic, confusion, and fear; that was what he and the other zealots wanted to instill. It was the perfect canvas for the coming Shapeless to paint their perfect picture of death and peace.

“It’s beautiful, sir.” The zealot that had previously been pinned down outside the apartment stood next to Ducar, looking out the windows.

“It is.” Ducar loaded another magazine into his rifle. “Come, we have sixty-one more floors to go.”

TWO

AN UNEASY ALLIANCE

“I’M NOT HAPPY ABOUT THIS.” AIC Commodore Thorne—a proud man, and stubborn to boot—sat in Captain Rhule’s quarters, right across from the second-highest ranking AIC officer left after the battles on Europa and the destruction of Vassar-1.

“None of us are, Commodore, but this is the only way. You saw what those things can do. We can’t afford to keep fighting each other when these alien things...” Rhule paused for a moment, giving Ben an opening.

“Shapeless,” added Ben.

“Yes, these Shapeless intend on wiping humankind out. And they’re clearly capable. I’ve already been in contact with Grand Admiral Lane of the UEF. He’s agreed that all available UEF assets not on Earth will be diverted back home to protect it. We’ll rendezvous with them.”

“And they just trusted you at your word?” questioned Thorne.

“We sent data on the whole encounter down there on Europa. We know they have their own sources, too. They didn’t need to trust me. They knew.”

Thorne took a moment to think, though there was only one possible conclusion to come to. “Okay. We have a truce for now.” He got up. His two bodyguards joined him at his side. “I need to tell our admirals and what’s left of our fleets. I promise I’ll make sure that they listen.”

Rhule shook Thorne’s hand. “I’m glad to hear it, and it’s going to be an honor to fight at your side. We have a base on Earth’s moon, and some docks with more ships. We’ll rendezvous with you and yours there, as soon as possible.”

“Sounds good, Commander. Best of luck.” With that, a very grumpy Thorne left Rhule’s office on the AIC *Veruvian* to return to his own ship.

“That went...well?” Ben had sat in on the whole uncomfortable meeting. Just an hour before, the UEF and AIC had been actively killing each other. Now the most bullish of those on either side had agreed to not only stand down, but to fight alongside their decades-long enemy. So that talk was a bit intense, emotionally charged just beneath the surface of military officers’ politeness.

“He really is an old stubborn bastard, but we got their help. That’s all that matters. And I wouldn’t have gotten it without *your* help, Ben, so thank you.” Rhule refused to sit back down. “Now all we have to do is come up with some kind of battle plan.”

“How many ships do you have left?” asked Ada. She sat in a chair in the corner. Unlike Clarissa, Congo and Wan, she was a soldier, and that seemed to count for enough in Rhule’s book that she’d been allowed to sit in. Ben supposed it spoke to the general opinion of Engano and her department that a UEF soldier qualified over an AIC operative like Clarissa.

Rhule sighed. “Not enough.”

“We have to make do with what we’ve got. Have you gotten in contact with Annapolis?”

“I’m working on it.”

Ben tilted his head to the side. “Working on it?”

“They’re going to take a little more convincing than the Grand Admiral. He’s a soldier, and gets the logistics and implications of what’s to come. Annapolis is full of politicians. *Earth* politicians. Getting them to risk their positions at the polls by putting the planet on high alert, that’s going to take more than some data feeds.”

Ben walked over to the window in Rhule’s office. Through it he saw the Jovian moon still in the process of dying, and the Shapeless ship slowly departing, having already done the hideous deed it was there to do. There was no doubt in his mind that it was leaving for Earth.

“That’s not enough,” Ada said. She was leaning forward in the chair now, hands clasped in front of her like she was ready to spring into a fight at any moment. “You have to make them see.”

Rhule shrugged. “Greasing the wheels of bureaucracy is Engano’s game, not mine. She’s consider a snake on Earth, so this is falling to me. And frankly, Earth is obstinate. My understanding is you have to have ... patience.” It seemed like the word pained him.

“Patience?” Ben felt sick. “I don’t think you really realize what this means.”

“I do,” Rhule said. “But they—”

“Before,” Ben said, talking over Rhule, “all we had to worry about was these things invading Earth. And that was bad enough.” He waved his hand. “Some planetary assault, followed by these damn gooey monsters in every city across the planet. But now, *now* they have a weapon that can, at least in theory, destroy an entire planet. *My planet!*”

Rhule slammed his hand into his fist. “Don’t lecture me!” he thundered.

Ben was shocked into silence. Even Ada leaned back in her chair. “Maybe you’ve forgotten,” Rhule said slowly, visibly working his jaw to keep his voice in check, “but that invasion of Earth you’re so worried about already happened to my home. On my watch.”

Ben flinched. Had he known that Rhule was from Vassar-1? He was probably home-ported there, so he obviously considered it his spiritual home, no matter where he was from among the Outer Worlds.

“I’m sorry.” Ben pinched the bridge of his nose. “You’re right. These things have already killed so many.”

Ada stood up, seemingly spurred on by Rhule’s outburst. “But that’s exactly why we have to stop them *together*. Individually, they’ll tear us apart. And that’s exactly their plan.”

Rhule sighed, calming himself as he looked from Ada to Ben and back again. “If I could get anyone on Earth to listen, I’d gladly explain that to them.”

Ben shook his head. “Bureaucracy can’t be involved. Everyone back home needs to scramble every damn ship they have, arm everyone who can fire a damn gun and get ready to fight for their lives.”

He turned and looked back out the large viewport. When he realized Rhule hadn’t spoken for several seconds, he turned to find Rhule was studying him and Ada.

“You two have way too much passion and way too little cynicism. Do you know that?”

Ben didn’t need compliments. He needed help, and he hated asking for help from anyone. He wanted to make it happen himself. Right now.

“I can do it,” Ben said. “I can fly back to Earth and—”

Ada leapt to her feet. “Not without me.”

“No,” Rhule said sharply. “Give me more credit than that. I have ... other channels to pursue. And Engano might be a pariah, but she still has contacts of her own. We can convince these assholes that they don’t want to be the ones in office when Earth falls.” He cocked his head. “Besides, I have something more important that you two can do right here.”

Ben snorted. “More important than getting Earth off their collective asses?”

Rhule held Ben’s gaze. “I need you and your people in the assembly room.”

Ben assumed he meant Clarissa, Congo, and Wan. He wasn’t sure if he’d call them his people. If anything, they were Ada’s people. He exchanged a quick glance with her. She frowned back.

“The assembly room?” he asked.

“No one on board knows these creatures better than you folks,” Rhule said. “I want you to brief the fleet. We’ll be making fold jumps to near-Earth orbit soon. My people are antsy. They’re smart enough to know we’re risking it all by jumping in the UEF’s lap. They don’t understand the alien threat, not like I do. And I don’t understand it like you do.”

“Brief the fleet?” Ben felt like his mind was going a bit slow.

“Like you said, billions of lives are on the line. They need to know what you know, but they also need to see the same passion you just gave me. Trust me, kid. You got it.”

“Got what?”

“Same thing your dad had. The ability to inspire and lead. Don’t waste that gift. Because I got to tell you, it’s rare.”

ADA CHALKED it up to chauvinism, pure and simple, that Rhule was only interested in Ben giving this little talk. And she was fine with that. She had better things to do than give speeches.

But as they walked through the halls of the *Veruvian*, she could feel that Ben was nervous. Hell, she could see it written on his face.

“What the hell am I going to say?” he murmured.

Ada thought about that. “In my experience, it doesn’t matter. What’s happening is happening, whether they like it or not. All you’re doing is

giving them a reason to push through when the shit hits the fan.”

“And the shit *is* going to hit the fan,” Ben said.

“Oh, definitely.”

The walked along in silence for a few more seconds. “So, I’m a bit nervous,” Ben admitted at last.

“You don’t say,” Ada said.

Ben broke into a smile. “I think you should be the one doing this. I’m not much for speeches.”

“Maybe,” she said, “but Rhule wants it to be you. Hard to argue why.”

Ben raised an eyebrow.

Ada sighed. “You have the name with the cache. That’s the truth. You’re a Saito.”

“Then my father should be the one doing it,” he said.

Ada stopped walking. Ben did too. “So the great Ben Saito, who’s faced whole fleets of enemies, cultists, commandos, shapeshifting aliens, and death itself is going to fall apart *now*?”

Ben snorted. “I guess when you put it that way...”

Ada laughed too. Ever since Ben had fallen in with Clarissa—or Morgan, as she was back then—people had been trading on his name. He’d told Ada that was the reason they’d grabbed him in the first place.

She knew that Ben did his best to assert himself as a leader, but she could tell that it was uncomfortable for him, whatever everyone else projected on him. Frankly, it came more naturally to her, but there was no changing roles now. He was the one with the name, and he’d have to be the one to wield it.

“Just don’t screw up,” she said.

Ben snorted again. “Thanks for the pep talk.”

Ada patted his hand. “That’s what I’m here for.” She couldn’t help getting in another dig. “All I’m here for, apparently.”

“Ada—”

“I know,” she said. “Just messing with you. Besides, you know me. I’d rather be shooting something.”

Ben rolled his eyes. “Marines.”

“You’re welcome,” Ada said.

In the distance, she saw the large assembly room. People were already funneling in. “That’s your cue. I’m getting the others and bringing them up here.”

“Don’t let anyone give you shit,” Ben said.
Ada smiled as they separated. “You, too.”

THREE

THE CHASE

“PLEASE, FRIEND ADMIRAL,” said the yellow-eyed alien from inside his cage. “You must stop. You must let them finish this.”

“No, I really don’t have to stop anything, creature.” Admiral Chevenko sat in the dreadnought’s commander’s chair, looking through the viewing screens at Lee Saito’s ship. He should have the damn creature below deck, but he didn’t trust it to be out of his sight. At this point, he couldn’t trust anyone.

Saito’s ship had made a run for it, as expected, and the dreadnought was pushing hard to intercept. “He’s not to make it through that asteroid field!” Chevenko barked, as if he could will it to be so.

“Yes sir!” answered Lieutenant Commander Anastasia Chevenko.

Chevenko smiled. Oh, how surprised Lee would be to learn the truth about one of his *Atlas* navigators. This, of course, was Chevenko’s real daughter. The one aboard the *Atlas* had been a Shapeless creation, a saboteur planted on the ill-fated super dreadnought, who had fed the admiral all the intel he desired.

“Sir, if I may,” the copilot across from Anastasia said. “We’re not prepared to enter into an asteroid field like this. I’m not sure our shields will hold up, and we’re too big to maneuver our way through it.”

“I’m well aware of the risks. Arm all cannons. Set half of them to shoot some of these damn rocks out of our way, while the others focus on that damn ship.”

“Sir, I can’t, we won’t make—”

Anastasia took out her pistol and shot the copilot in the head. He was knocked right out of his seat and tumbled to the ground, limbs akimbo, as a

pool of blood grew under his head.

No one on the command deck moved or spoke.

Anastasia nodded calmly as she holstered her pistol. "I don't need him. We'll make it through, Dad."

"That's my girl," Chevenko said with a smile.

LEE SPED through the asteroid field that separated the Shapeless' home planet from open space. It had been a while since he'd actually had to pilot like that himself. It was made all the harder with only one arm, the stump of the other cauterized. A low, throbbing ache managed to penetrate the haze of pain meds in his blood, but he soldiered on.

Though there was a fair bit of rust, it flaked off within a couple minutes of entering the hazardous area. He felt like a young man again. There was no time for Lee to enjoy his newfound feeling of youth, though.

Not with a damn dreadnought after me.

If he wasn't extremely careful, he'd never make it to the Shapeless' home planet. Too reckless, and he'd end up splattered across one of these rocks. Too careful, and the powerful dreadnought would run him down. Neither was an option worth contemplating.

As Lee weaved through the asteroids that moved in arcing lines like they were on taut strings, the trajectories grew increasingly complex as cascading impacts were registered, thanks to the endless cannon fire from the dreadnought pursuing him, coming ever closer as it went. His pulse raced, pupils dilating as adrenaline surged through his body, helping him stay alert.

A shot from Chevenko's dreadnought's many cannons hit an asteroid just ahead of Lee. Pieces of its debris bounced off Lee's interceptor's shields, creating light blue ripples, slightly obscuring his view. He almost soiled himself, as he was a split second from colliding with another asteroid his obstructed view hid from him. At the last moment he steered clear of it.

"Can't keep going like this," Lee murmured to himself. If he kept proceeding as he was, eventually the dreadnought would hit him.

Lee pulled with all the might his one arm could muster and took a sharp turn to port. Instead of making his way towards the edge of the asteroid

field, he steered further into it, hoping that the dreadnought would follow.

It did.

Once he saw that the dreadnought was falling for his trap, Lee took control of the cannons on top of his ship. Able to swivel, he aimed them behind him. Using the auto targeting, he locked on to a dozen asteroids behind him and fired. It was so rapid and efficient that those space rocks turned into a sheet of debris that he could hide behind, if only for a few moments.

“WHERE’D HE GO?” Chevenko watched as his dreadnought was faced with the debris that Lee hid behind. The floor rumbled, and he felt like he could sense the asteroids colliding with and bouncing off the shields, even if it was surely his imagination. A smart man would check on the shields’ power levels, but Chevenko knew the levels would hold. Lee’s power would be depleted long before his shields were.

“He couldn’t have gone far,” Anastasia said.

Chevenko agreed, but kept that to himself. He wanted Lee found immediately, and damn anything else.

The sensor operator kept running wider and wider sweeps. “Still nothing.”

“He’s out there,” Anastasia said with growing irritation.

Chevenko sat back and let his people work. He expected that they could

Lee’s ship came screaming out from around the debris, guns blazing, aiming for the dreadnought’s cannons. He must have unloaded everything but his nukes.

“Stay with him,” Chevenko growled, knowing that whatever damage their cannons received, as long as they stuck close, they’d have an advantage to drive home.

Lee’s desperate gamble did little more than further deplete the massive vessel’s shields, and allowed him to pass the ship and make a last-ditch run for the Shapeless planet.

Lee’s plan was good, if not desperate. But it only partially succeeded. As he flew as fast as possible away from the dreadnought, he got clipped by

one of the ship's undamaged cannons. It was only a partial impact, but it was far too strong for his smaller ship's shields to prevent.

A second later, another cannon blast thumped his ship, this one more forcefully. It hit one of his engines and sent the ship into a tailspin.

Lee was in a perilous position. He didn't have control over his ship, and he was still in the asteroid field.

"We got him!" Anastasia exclaimed.

Lee's ship, black vapor trail behind it, dancing in zero gravity, careened wildly in the asteroid field, bouncing off rocks like a pinball.

"Not yet," Chevenko said. "He's not dead yet. The man's like a cockroach. We need to be sure. Take us in closer." He'd known Lee too long to be fooled into thinking he was dead. He'd once seen the former commander fight his way out of an AIC prison, alone, unarmed. Surviving this would've been child's play.

"He's out of control in an asteroid—"

"Get us closer," Chevenko snarled. "Now."

LEE WAS certain he was dead. Every alarm went off in his ship's cockpit. The red emergency lights were on. Sparks flew out of the console in front of him. Only his seat belt kept him from flying out of his seat as his ship hit seemingly every asteroid in his path.

"Warning, shields at twenty percent," said the ship's operating system in an unhurried voice.

Lee cast his eyes around the control board in front of him, frantically looking for something he could do. Some system still working. Some way to transfer energy or control.

But regaining control was impossible now. Propulsion was out. Power was failing, and shields with it.

Lee closed his eyes and tried to think. He was close. So close.

But the odds were... He pushed the thought away. He wasn't accepting fate. Not like this.

After a moment, he felt everything around him go silent. The world seemed to slow down.

In his mind's eye, he saw himself at the beach with his son. It was the same boardwalk the strange alien mind meld had made him visit before. It seemed like ages ago, both in the dream and in real time. He was holding Ben's hand.

"Are you and mommy fighting?" asked young Ben, stuffed animal clutched tight to his chest.

"We were. Yes. But sometimes grown-ups, even moms and dads, fight," explained a younger Lee. They stared out at the rolling waves of the Atlantic. In the distance he saw the top of the Washington Monument poking up out of the salty waters.

"Are you going to get a disorce?" asked young Ben.

Lee smiled ruefully. "Divorce, kiddo," he said as he picked Ben up and carefully placed and held him on the top rail of the boardwalk. "And no, we're not getting divorced. It was just an argument."

"I don't want you to get divorced."

"Neither do I," Lee said. Then he pointed at the water, as much to distract himself as his son. "Look at it, Ben. Isn't it something else?"

"It's pretty."

"I know I'm not always around. I know that, I don't know, I'm not always the best dad. But I have an important job to do. I protect all of this from those who want to destroy it. I protect you from the bad guys."

"I know. Mommy says you're a soldier."

"That's true."

"She says that daddy can't be here because you don't only have to protect me, but all the other kids as well."

"Your mom's a wise woman. Don't ever forget that." Lee kissed his son on his cheek. "And don't ever forget how much I love you, Ben. Don't ever forget that."

Lee opened his eyes. His grip tightened on the pilot's stick. He regained his focus. He remembered why he was out here. He remembered why he'd sacrificed so much. He had to protect his son. He had to protect the Earth. And he couldn't do either if he died in some asteroid field in the middle of nowhere.

"Mommy says you're a soldier." Lee looked over and saw young Ben in his copilot's seat. He knew Ben wasn't really there. He was losing his mind. He understood that. Maybe it was what the Shapeless had done to him, or

maybe he was just going over the edge all on his own. Either way, he didn't care.

"You're goddamn right I am," Lee said.

Lee couldn't avoid the asteroids in front of him. But he could let them work for him.

He coaxed control out of the ship that he didn't expect. Maneuvering thrusters somewhere complied with his force on the stick. It was the ship's computer attempting to compensate in any way it could.

With what little control he had over his ship, Lee managed to steer her, bottom first, towards one of the asteroids. He deployed the boarding cable—the same one he'd used on Archeon to grab the chunk of Herald Stone.

It was going to be a risky move. There was a chance that the cable would simply snap off from the force of trying to stop his ship's wild spinning out of control. Getting the clamp at the end to actually grab the asteroid in the first place was a long shot. Then he had to hope that his ship didn't break apart when he tried to land on it, hugging the space rock.

Here goes nothing.

Lee opened the clamp of the docking cable. It jumped and bounced over the surface of the asteroid. With nothing to guide him, Lee had to go on instinct.

He felt a slight tremor run up and down the ship's superstructure, then another. On the third, he pressed the button to have the clamp snapped closed.

Even with his seat's restraints tightened, Lee's whole body was violently jarred forward as the ship came to a sudden stop. His head hit against one of the panels that was overhead between the pilot's and copilot's seats.

But he was alive.

And despite the creaking uneasy noises in the cockpit, his ship was in one piece and, more importantly, hidden.

Young Ben smiled from the copilot's seat, like this was a game he was playing with his father; then he disappeared in the blink of an eye.

“WHERE’D HE GO?” Chevenko bellowed. He stood from his captain’s chair, fury etched on his face.

“I...” Anastasia looked at her instruments, radars, and holographic screens, desperate to find the little ship.

“How the hell did this happen? How’d we lose him?”

Chevenko felt physically ill. Not only was losing Lee unacceptable to himself and to Anita Lau; more worrying was what the Shapeless would think.

“Sir,” one of the other crew members said meekly.

“What!?”

The man seemed to shrink as Chevenko’s hot gaze fell on him. “We may need to get out of this asteroid field,” he said shakily. “Our shields are almost depleted. We won’t be able to last another couple of minutes in here. But we can get out and go around it to—”

A shot rang out like thunder, echoing around the steel walls of the bridge. Chevenko watched as the man crumpled to the ground, a hole blossoming in his midsection.

The man choked off a gurgling noise as he tried to speak, then looked down dumbly at the blood gushing down the front of his perfectly-pressed uniform.

Chevenko looked over at his daughter, expecting that she again was the shooter. *We’re going to run out of crewmembers at this rate.* But no, she merely turned back to her instruments. Then he looked down at the gun in his hand. He didn’t remember unholstering it. Or pointing it. Or pulling the trigger. But as the man spasmed and died, he didn’t regret it. Not at all.

The dreadnought’s command deck was so silent you could hear a pin drop.

“We’re not going anywhere until we find him,” Chevenko said calmly, his low voice cutting through the silence. “Is that clear?”

No one spoke.

Chevenko felt the rage boiling under his skin. This wasn’t like him, he thought. Something was wrong with him. But he ignored the restraining impulse. Instead, he reholstered his sidearm and stared around the room, daring anyone to meet his gaze.

“None of us are going anywhere or doing anything until Saito is space dust,” he growled.

Finally, Anastasia spoke up. “But he was right, Admiral. We need to get out of here. Our shields can’t take it anymore.”

“He’s hiding,” Chevenko snapped. He sat back down in his command chair, breathing heavily.

He was so lost in his rage that he barely registered that the little yellow-eyed alien he had in a cage right next to him was sitting cross-legged with those unearthly eyes closed, concentrating.

Chevenko calmed himself and forced himself to think more clearly. “We need to flush him out,” he said.

“How?”

“Fire everything in a concentric pattern moving outward. If he’s hiding, we’ll either get lucky and take him out, or at least take away his hiding spots.”

Anastasia shared a glance with the tactical officer. He cleared his throat as if he had something to say, but Anastasia cut him off.

“Yes, sir,” she said simply, and nodded at the officer. He closed his mouth and turned to his control board.

Moments later, every cannon on the dreadnought started firing.

LEE STOOD FAST as the glowing streaks of cannon fire flew all over the place, blowing up asteroids all around him. He didn’t budge from his hiding spot. To him it was clear what was happening. The admiral was desperate, and had conceded any advantage he might’ve had.

Now Lee knew exactly where Chevenko was. More importantly, he knew right where the dreadnought was in relation to the Shapeless planet.

All he had to do was hold on and wait for his moment.

There was only one way Lee was going to outrun the dreadnought, and he knew it. He’d have to fold skip, a much shorter form of the fold jump and considerably more dangerous. But there wasn’t another way. So he spun up the fold engines as he hid, and waited for the asteroid to slowly spin around and face the Shapeless home planet. Once it did, he’d detach and fold skip immediately, leaving the dreadnought in his wake, and worry about the consequences later.

After what seemed like an eternity, the firing stopped.

Lee wanted to initiate his fold jump, but something told him to hold back. To wait a little longer.

Sweat ran down his back. He watched the Shapeless world rotate into view. It was now or never.

“WHY DID YOU STOP?” Chevenko snapped.

“We have to cool the core,” Anastasia answered for the tactical officer. “We can restart again in a few seconds.”

Chevenko frowned as he scanned the asteroid field. Again, there was nothing. And there was no way of knowing for sure if they’d hit and destroyed Lee’s ship.

“Keep your eyes peeled,” Chevenko said.

Just then, two Marines came in and dragged the dead crew member away as they’d done the dead copilot earlier. Chevenko felt another wave of deep silence fall over the bridge.

“He’s still out there,” he said. “I can feel—”

Something caught the admiral’s attention, but it wasn’t outside in space. It was inside the command deck.

He spun around, thinking one of the Marines that was dragging away the dead officer was behind him. But no, they were both gone now. They’d slid right out the back hatch of the command center.

Then he realized who the man behind him was.

He let out a gasp. His eyes were playing tricks on him. *They must be*, he thought.

Lee Saito was standing right in front of the viewing screens, staring and smiling at him.

“Lee?” Chevenko said aloud as he got up out of his chair, pistol in his hand.

His daughter looked up and over at him, confused. “What are you... how’d you get in here?”

Chevenko heard a shriek; he quickly turned around and fired his pistol. He didn’t hit anyone, but managed to frighten everyone even more than before, which wasn’t an easy feat.

“You missed,” said the image of Lee on the command deck.

“Dad, what’re you doing? Put the gun down.” Anastasia stood up, ignoring her duties as a pilot. Her voice was strained, like she was trying to talk a crazy man off a ledge.

Chevenko barely registered her words. “How did it get out?”

“How did what get out?” Anastasia asked.

Chevenko ignored her. His attention was on the yellow-eyed alien, which had somehow gotten out of its cage. He looked on, confused and nervous, as the alien grew to three times its size, into a hulking glowing-eyed beast with snarling teeth and large, long talons. It roared at him.

He fired again.

The yellow-eyed alien ran around the command bridge, dancing wildly around as Chevenko kept firing. One of the crew members tried to come up behind him and restrain him, but Chevenko gave the man an elbow to the nose that sent him sprawling.

“Dad! Stop!” yelled Anastasia.

He ignored her as he kept firing. Then the alien vanished. “Where the hell is it?”

“What are you talking about?” his daughter pleaded.

Chevenko was annoyed she wasn’t at her station, but when he looked at the pilot’s seat, he saw something sitting there.

The yellow-eyed alien leered back at him. Then, with one arm, it lifted up the admiral’s daughter and threatened to snap her neck.

Chevenko quickly reloaded, and emptied the new magazine into the alien monster.

Suddenly it disappeared again. Someone was screaming.

And Chevenko found himself looking at Anastasia, his only child, with wide eyes, and bullet holes in her torso.

She crumpled forward in a pool of blood. Her body landed hard and remained motionless.

“No...” Chevenko rushed to her side and fell to his knees, cradling her body in his hands. Blood ran through his fingers and down his arm. “I... it...”

The admiral, tears running down his cheeks, looked around the commander bridge, still in a state of shock.

There were dead and injured crew members everywhere. The walls were riddled with bullet holes. Equipment sparked.

Those that had survived were rushing towards the exit now that the shooting had stopped. Sitting there in its cage, calm as could be, was the yellow-eyed alien, who stared at the admiral.

What the admiral didn't realize—what Lee had figured out and Clarissa had discovered—was that once connected to a mind meld, connected to the Abyss, that connection was always there. It was always open. Not only did that mean that memories could live on with a being even after they woke up, as with Clarissa's husband, but an adept mind-meld user could manipulate that connection. In Chevenko's case, he's been forced into hallucinating a yellow-eyed monster rampaging through his command bridge.

"I...I did this..." Chevenko slowly started to stitch the pieces together. He turned his attention back to his daughter. "Anastasia." The admiral stroked his only daughter's hair. "I'm...he's going to pay for this! He's dead!"

Chevenko, tears still flowing, got behind the pilot's sticks. He wiped his nose and waited. Lee had killed his daughter. Had destroyed his ship. He was *dead*.

Then he saw it. A burst of energy from the corner of his viewscreen. A tiny, unmistakable thruster burn from the surface of one of the millions of indistinct rocks. Lee was scampering from his hiding place, Chevenko knew, gambling on his run for the surface.

Chevenko smashed down the controls to fire their port lasers, but nothing happened. A flash of light told him the core was still set to power recycle.

"Release the lasers, you idiot!" he screamed at the tactical officer.

But when he turned, there was no one there. The bridge was empty. Silent except for the few moans of injured crewmen all around him. Movement from behind him. Perhaps some of the Marines peering in.

But nobody to man tactical.

Another flash drew his attention back to the active sensors.

A fold jump.

Chevenko slammed his hands down on the controls, fingers flying. The ship's power was critical, her weapons systems offline, and her shield power precariously low, but she had full thrust power.

"Oh no you don't," Chevenko screamed as he set the targeting computer to track and follow Lee.

His target finally revealed itself. Now all he had to do was chase after it.

A warning message told him of the dreadnought's critical shield weakness. He ignored it. Another told him the ship was shedding escape pods. He ignored it, too.

He pushed the thrusters forward to the maximum he could get out of them. No matter what, he wasn't going to let Lee escape.

FOUR

CURIOSITY KILLED THE...

DETECTIVE SYDAL LOOKED up at the ladder that he believed led out of the lunar underground and into the UEF base on Earth's moon. Up at the end of the ladder was another bulkhead-type hatch, like you'd find on a submarine. Still covered in some of the blood splatter from the Waterman-Lau scientists he'd killed at the exotic matter generator, he started to climb the rungs.

When he reached the top, Sydal had to position his body in such a way that he was able to get some leverage. The wheel that served as the door handle was a little rusted, but he was able to spin it open. That's when the nerves hit.

You gotta do this. Just be ready for anything.

Sydal, two flamethrowers on his back and one around his shoulder, took his pistol out, knowing that he had no idea what was on the other side of that hatch. He held his breath and pushed it open just enough to take a peek at what he was walking into.

Nothing.

Sydal climbed slowly out through the hatch, carefully and silently closing the door behind him. Looking around, he had a hard time figuring out exactly where he was.

Then he turned a corner and saw steam, and heard the sound of running water.

As he crept along, the detective realized he was in a locker room, which was perfect. If he was going to move through the base, he needed to blend in. Walking around in bloodstained civilian clothes wasn't going to fly.

There was no way to know how many people were in the showers, but a quick look at the lockers showed him no one was in the main area. Sydal quickly searched for an open locker, knowing that at any second, someone could emerge from the showers.

He found one with a uniform hanging on the hook inside. After taking it, he retreated back to where he first came in, slightly hidden away, to change.

He heard two men talking and leaving the showers. One of them cursed, and Sydal didn't have trouble imagining that the open locker he'd found belonged to that man. A man who now couldn't find his work clothes.

Sydal leaned back into his small space. He was well hidden from incidental view, but if someone were looking hard, they could find him. He moved as quickly as he could, ignoring the words of the confused man.

Sydal ripped his old shirt up and made a bandage. When he tried to wrap it around his thigh where his gunshot wound was, he almost screamed out in pain. It hurt so much worse than it had before. He was glad for once that there wasn't much light where he was. He didn't want to see just how infected it was, considering it had been exposed to a pool full of corpses and sewer water.

Sydal, sweating profusely, desperately searched his old pants, which were on the tiled floor next to him. Inside was the last of the painkillers he'd pilfered from the hospital earlier. He took every single one. Sure, he might feel high, but at least he'd be able to walk without limping, making it easier to fit in. That was all that mattered at the moment. Conformity was his path to his son.

Dressed and ready to go, Sydal stood up straight. He gritted his teeth, knowing the painkillers were going to take a little while to work. But he couldn't wait for that.

The soldiers left the locker room together. Either they'd given up on finding the man's uniform, or were heading to find someone who could help. All that mattered to Sydal was that he had to move now.

He put one flamethrower around his shoulder, leaving the others behind, and entered the locker room proper.

Before exiting the locker room, Sydal stopped by the row of sinks and checked himself out in the mirror. Apart from being unshaven, the only thing that made him stand out was the Waterman-Lau scientists' blood

splatter on his face. He washed it off. With water dripping off his face, he looked himself in the eyes.

You're so close. Just keep going.

Sydal had no idea what the layout of the UEF Lunar Base was. The military police handled their own business. Sydal was persona non grata here. So when he exited the locker room, he had no idea where he was. For a little while he wandered, surprised by just how few people were here. He passed maybe two or three soldiers in ten minutes.

Where the hell is everyone?

He definitely wasn't complaining, but the math didn't add up. Before he'd been kicked into a hospital bed, the moon was crawling with UEF. So where had they gone?

Sydal stopped at a map holographically projected from the floor further down the hall. He scanned it, looking for anything or anywhere that those bastards would keep a prisoner. Because that's what Matthew was to these monsters.

That's when he saw it. The prison cells. They weren't underground, or even on one of the bottom floors. The base prison was on the second to top floor.

Okay, well, looks like I need to find a lift tube.

Though he didn't feel pain from his leg anymore, Sydal did feel the effects of infection. Sweat practically poured down his face as he searched for any sign of a lift. Finally he found one. The lift pod was attached to one of the interior supports for the dome. It ran inside a tube that extended nearly the length of the structure.

Sydal got into the lift. He pressed the button for the eighth floor. Just as he thought that this was too easy to be true, a bony hand slipped between the doors and triggered them open again.

Two cultists stepped in.

Both cultists smelled like rank body odor and the coppery scent of blood. Sydal shifted his body and carefully pushed the muzzle of the flamethrower out of sight. From a distance, the weapon didn't stand out any more than any other piece of equipment slung over a shoulder, but in the tight confines of the lift, it would raise eyebrows. He kept his head down and tried to exist as a barely-noticed wallflower.

"These people, I swear to the Abyss," said one of the cultists.

“Cattle, buddy. These aren’t people, they’re cattle, all lined up for the slaughter. I almost feel bad for them.”

“No reason to feel bad, man. They’re going someplace better than here. Hell, I’m jealous.”

“Jealous? Did you see the look on that mother’s face when I freed her kid?”

The one cultist laughed. “Yeah, she was *not* happy.”

“Of course not. These cattle are too damn dumb to see that we’re doing them a favor. I’m not jealous of them, I feel bad that they’re afraid. That they’re so ignorant. Besides, when we transition it will be at the hands of the Saviors themselves, not lined up against a wall and shot. We got it good.”

Sydal felt his fingernails digging into his palms. All he wanted to do was beat the two cultists to death, but he contained himself. Once Matthew was safe, he’d come back for them. He’d take out the whole lot of the murderers.

One of the men glanced around. He must have seen the flamethrower in the reflection of the tube’s glass. His eyes grew wide, and Sydal tensed. But then he realized the man’s expression was one of excitement.

“Holy shit! Is that a flamethrower?”

“Where the hell did you get one of those?” asked the other man.

From a bunch of assholes like you.

“I dunno, they gave it to me when I got here.”

“Lucky bastard. Man, that would’ve been so much more fun.”

“All they give us is these rifles. Good for a fight, yeah, but to slaughter cattle? They’re pretty boring.”

Sydal pictured grabbing one of the cultists by the back of his head and repeatably smashing it against the elevator door until it was nothing but gray goo and shards of skull matter. Then he’d pump a couple of bullets into the other sadistic murderer’s gut, making him bleed out and die slow. But that would inevitably raise the alarm when he was this close, so instead he forced a smile and nodded his head.

“Anyway, this is us, happy hunting,” the first one said.

The lift stopped. The doors opened, and Sydal wasn’t prepared for what he saw.

The lighting was low and pulsing. He could make out bloody smears on the walls on both sides of a hallway. Cultists covered in gore wiped

themselves off with towels. Some had guns; others, machetes and large heavy hammers. Bloodcurdling screams and desperate crying assaulted his senses. He backed right into the rear of the lift, smacking against the glass.

The two men stepped clear, and the doors began to close.

In that brief moment, Sydal had a choice to make. He could let the doors close and continue to search for his son.

Or he could act.

As much as he wanted to find and save his son, he couldn't just let innocent people die. Who could say if his son wasn't in there somewhere? And more than anything, he couldn't let these men live.

Sydal stepped out of the lift.

He raised his pistol and shot one of the cultists he'd just shared a short ride with in the back of the head, and he dropped instantly.

Then he shot the other in the throat. While the man clawed at his throat and tried to spin away, Sydal wrenched the man's rifle from him and started shooting everything in the hallway that moved.

He shot the biggest threats first: the cultists with guns. There was some gunfire exchanged, but the element of surprise won out. Then the others, armed with machetes, hammers, and other savage weapons, scattered as he poured bullets into the hallway, cutting them down as they ran. Someone threw a knife at him, and it smacked off his shoulder and bounced away. Sydal screamed like an animal and fired wildly in the direction it had come from.

More men fell. The floor was thick with bodies now, and slippery with blood, as Sydal charged forward.

But he knew all the blood wasn't from the bastards he was killing. Most of it was from their victims. He could see blood pooling at the bases of doorways that lined either side of the hallway.

He entered the first open doorway and gagged.

When Sydal had come across the pool of bodies in the water treatment plant, he'd thought he'd seen the worst of what humanity was capable of. He was wrong, so terribly wrong. Mutilated bodies littered the floor. Some were just pieces of what once were whole human beings. Others' faces were bashed in beyond recognition. The smell was overwhelming, so strong it hit the back of Sydal's throat and made his eyes water.

Against the far wall, a dozen naked people clung to each other. In the low light they looked like a single mass of trembling humanity covered in

blood and unified in their terror.

In the middle of the room were two cultists. One of them had a fire axe, the other a machete. The latter was still hacking away at a sickly old man on the floor who tried to fight off his attacker with nothing but bloody hands. Each swing tore another deep gash into him, exposing bone.

Sydal shot the cultist in the back of his knee just as he raised his machete for another strike; then he put a bullet in the other one's chest as he tried to rush him with the axe. One or two of the people along the far wall screamed out, but most were too traumatized to even comprehend what they were seeing.

Blinded by fury, Sydal slowly walked up to the former machete-wielding cultist, who was rolling around, crying and screaming on the floor. He begged for mercy. What he got was the detective emptying the rest of his magazine into the man's face.

Sydal looked over at the naked innocents still pinning themselves against the far wall. There wasn't anything he could say to them, nothing that would get through their heads at the moment, and he didn't want to lie and assure them that everything would be okay.

Instead of lying to the survivors, Sydal dropped the rifle, since it was out of bullets. He picked up the axe. After giving them a good look and making sure Matthew wasn't among them, he rested the axe on his shoulder and moved on to the next room.

"Matthew!" yelled Sydal as he entered the second room. It was much the same as the first, but the cultists in here cowered near the entrance.

One held what looked like a long metal pipe. On closer inspection, Sydal recognized it as a mechanic's jack extender arm. The cultist swung it in looping arcs in Sydal's direction. "Stay back," he said, more pleading than demanding.

The other man with him held out a scalpel, slashing it in the air. "Please, we were....I'm just doing what I was ordered," he said.

"Mmmhmm." Sydal nodded his head; then he set the axe down and calmly slid the flamethrower around. Before the men seemed to understand what was happening, he leveled it at them and flicked the flame wide open.

They screamed and turned around, with nowhere to run. The man with the pipe dropped it and fell into a pile of burning flesh, then thrashed and tried to rush at Sydal. But he was blind and wounded, and Sydal calmly sidestepped the burning man. Sydal let his flamethrower drop to his side;

then he grabbed the axe at his feet. With one quick motion, he plunged it into the cultist's blackened head.

As Sydal tried to wiggle it out of his skull, the second cultist threw his useless scalpel at him and made a run for it. Leaving the axe behind, Sydal calmly left the second room and went back out into the hallway.

Desperately pounding on the lift doors, the second cultist kept looking back, more and more terrified the closer Sydal got. Sydal slid the flamethrower off his shoulder, kept walking until he was in range, and briefly squeezed the trigger again.

When he returned, Sydal was surprised to find one of the Lunar civilians, a naked young woman, holding the axe. Wide-eyed, she stared at him and shook. He held out his hand. She handed it over.

"Pick them up," said Sydal. He was referring to the weapons that the dead cultists had dropped. The woman picked up the short knife, while a middle-aged man picked up the metal pipe.

Now three, Sydal moved on to the third of four rooms. These cultists were completely unarmed. The two civilians he'd recently rescued rushed past him. Roaring and growling like cornered animals, they went to work on the Oblivion cultists in that room, who desperately were trying to find an exit.

Sydal didn't stick around to see what they did to them. All he heard were their screams as he moved on to the last room.

"Matthew?" asked Sydal before entering the room.

In the fourth and last room, he'd found a room full of thankfully fully clothed, frightened children. They were in one corner as a single woman sat against one of the walls. She was crying.

Sydal ignored the woman and looked at the children. Matthew wasn't among them. Deterred and still angry—maybe more so, seeing a room full of kids—he turned his attentions to the woman.

"I didn't...I couldn't hurt them," she said. Sydal suddenly realized she had a pistol in her lap. He tensed, but she didn't make a move for it. She was rocking back and forth, murmuring to herself.

Sydal did notice that there was no blood in this room, no signs of carnage. Still, that didn't garner the woman any mercy. If she showed any signs of pointing the gun at him or the kids, he'd roast her alive.

"They wanted me to kill them. I just...I couldn't. I'm not strong enough to send them to the Abyss." The woman was a mess. Tears kept running

down her cheeks, snot bubbling out her nose.

Sydal took a step to his right, then another. The flamethrower was imprecise. If he fired it from this point, he might hit some of the cowering children.

“I’m glad you didn’t,” he said, stalling for time. “You did the right thing.”

The woman looked up at him. Her face hardened. She reached for the gun.

Sydal rushed forward. “Don’t—”

Before he could finish, she shoved it in her mouth and pulled the trigger.

The children screamed as she toppled backwards.

Sydal didn’t even wait for the smoke to stop wafting out of her mouth before prying the pistol out of her hands.

Everything was painted red by the UEF base’s emergency lights. Alarms started to blare.

In a matter of minutes, UEF soldiers were sure to come flooding into this floor, and Sydal couldn’t be here when they did.

“Where are you going?” The civilian who handed Sydal’s axe back to him called out to him as he waited for the lift to return.

“To find my son,” answered Sydal.

“What should we do? Where do we go?”

He sketched out where he’d come up through the hatchway. Maybe she could lead the others there and escape. Maybe not. There wasn’t enough time for him to know or care. He had to find Matthew.

The lift arrived. “Good luck,” he said as he stepped in.

Sydal stood in the elevator, covered in blood, calmly staring at his own distorted reflection in the lift tube glass. He cracked his neck, took a deep breath, and exhaled. In the holographic display he saw the lift’s progress. His final stop was less than five seconds away. If his son wasn’t there, he didn’t know what he was going to do; but considering what he’d just done, it was going to be bad.

The lift stopped.

When the doors opened up, Sydal dropped his axe and backed up against the car wall. His legs felt weak, his head light, and his throat even drier than before.

“Maria?” he gasped. “Becca?”

Sydal couldn't believe his eyes. Standing there, waiting to greet him, were his dead wife and daughter.

They weren't alone, though. In between them, holding both their hands, was a pale bald-headed man with a sinister smile.

FIVE

STANDOFF

DIRECTOR ENGANO TOOK one look at Ben as he stood in front of the assembly room, and knew he'd get no respect from the ready crew of AIC *Veruvian* as they settled into their seats. Some, already seated, stared at him, confused.

The mood was somber. Most of the people in that room had lost friends in the fight on Europa, Engano suspected. None of them had any illusions that their fight was over.

"My name is Ben Saito," began Ben. "You don't know me, but your commander asked me to come talk to you in his stead."

"You aren't even in uniform, for God's sake, so I know you ain't no damn officer," said one of the AIC soldiers.

"Fair enough. I can go into where I'm from or what I've done, but really, the only thing that is important is what I know. What I know about is our new, unique enemy."

"The only enemy I know have 'fascist fed' before their name," added another soldier. A smattering of chuckles erupted from the group.

Engano stepped forward and waited a beat, so all attention shifted to her. She'd come in with Ben, and had set up the video sequence that he was about to lead the group through—the one that she'd prepared, with almost all the classified information she had on the Shapeless and the Oblivion cult.

"That's because you haven't faced anything like these aliens before," she said.

"So that's what this is." One of the AIC soldiers stood up and looked behind him, then pointed into the crowd, ostensibly at one of his friends.

“Called it. You owe me 30 credits.”

“Private Crisin, is it?” asked Engano coolly. The look she gave him could freeze boiling water. “Your family lives on Tergulon, out near the rim, right?”

The boy was a loudmouth like his father, a local elected official with a habit of starting fights that derailed his chosen profession.

Crisin looked surprised. “That’s right,” he answered warily.

“Well, Private, if you don’t sit down and listen to what Mr. Saito has to say, then I guarantee that your family on Tergulon will end up slaughtered.” Engano stared at the private until he quietly sat down.

“And that goes for all of you,” she said. “Make no mistake, this is a fight not for the AIC or UEF or even the Earth. This is a fight for our species. Keep treating it like any other fight, and it will be over quick. And so will everything you love.”

Silence descended like a curtain over the group. She knew some of that was due to her words and demeanor. Both had the practiced ability to command attention. But mostly, it was because they all knew who she was and what she knew.

“Thank you, Director,” said Ben.

Engano was already halfway to the back of the assembly room. She raised her hand and snapped, and the screens behind Ben came to life. Each one contained an image of the destroyed surface of Vassar-1. It was just the first of more than three dozen images and video clips that Ben would walk the group through.

“Listen up and listen good,” Engano said when she reached the back door. “And maybe, just maybe, you don’t all end up dead.”

She let her words hang in the air for another moment, then nodded at Ben and left.

She immediately ran into Ada, Clarissa, Congo, and Wan, who had gathered outside the assembly room.

“Director! You’re still alive?” Ada said with some surprise.

“Of course she is,” Clarissa said with a smile. “Old spies never die.”

“Old spies never retire,” Engano said. “Everyone dies.” There was an awkward silence after that. “Nonetheless, it’s nice to see you too, Agent.”

Clarissa nodded. “And you, ma’am.”

“I’d love to catch up, but I have to relay some news from Earth with our captain.”

“What happened?” asked the woman known as Congo.

Engano knew only that she was a doctor and that, like Wan, she was a pirate. But Clarissa and Ada had vouched for her.

“It looks like the battle is starting without us,” Engano said. “Oblivion cultist attacks have broken out all over Earth. We assume it’s an attempt to sow confusion ahead of the main assault. An unknown, unaccounted-for fleet also just took off from Earth’s moon. I’m pretty sure the UEF and my agents are the only ones who know. I’ve alerted Rhule, but it will take some time to inform the entire AIC fleet.”

“Shit. This is really happening, isn’t it?” asked Wan.

“Looks like it,” said Clarissa.

“I’m surprised you haven’t run yet,” Ada said to Wan.

The pirate feigned offense, but then shrugged. “I’d love to. Where would you recommend I run to?”

“There’s nowhere to run,” Engano said. “Nowhere at all.” On that note, she spun around and headed down the hall. Over her shoulder, she said to Ada, “Ben should be done soon. All he has to do is scare the shit out of everyone in there.”

THIRTY MINUTES PASSED. Wan and Congo sat on the floor across the hall from the assembly room, talking, killing time until the briefing was done. Mostly they reminisced about their crew, their dead crew.

“He really didn’t like to get up out of his damn chair,” laughed Congo, as she looked at her own hands that rested on top of her bent knees.

“No, he didn’t. Not even at the end. The crazy asshole could have disengaged from the pilot’s console if he’d just tried.” Wan shook his head bitterly. “Dumb bastard. But a hell of a pilot.”

Wan threw a coin across the hall at the main assembly room door. It clanged off of it and fell down to the floor. Then the door flew open.

Soldiers streamed out. None gave Wan or the rest of the group a second glance as they turned into the hallway and returned to their stations.

They were all silent. Too silent for Wan.

“What the hell did you tell them?” Wan asked when he saw Ben finally exit the room.

“Told them what the hell they’re up against,” Ben said. “And what’s at stake.”

“Seems like you really lit up the room,” Wan said.

Ben glanced at Ada. “Director Engano had some very detailed and very ... *graphic* ... footage from Vassar-1.”

Ada frowned. “That would do it.”

“They needed to see it,” Ben said. “And for those from Vassar-1, they needed to see what happened to their loved ones, what the Shapeless did. Now we have a motivated crew on this ship. We have motivated crews on every ship in this fleet. Or what’s left of it.”

Ben beckoned for them all to follow him down the hall.

“And where are we going?” asked Wan.

“Hangar One,” Ben said.

“We getting out of here?” Wan said as they approached the forward hatch into the enormous ship’s bay in the belly of the *Veruvian*.

“We’re report to the hangar so we can get our new ship. Then we’re making the jump and finishing this—”

“A new ship?” Wan blurted out.

They stepped through the hangar hatch, and Ben glanced back and smiled. Then he nodded at a ship, whose design Wan was very familiar with. They all were.

“That’s ours?” Congo gasped. For once, Wan and his crewmate were on the same frequency.

Ben nodded at the forward berth, where a data console indicated his name. “Looks like it.”

“That’s a Supramax Hawk,” Wan said.

“A Mark Four,” Ben said. He sounded pleasantly surprised.

Wan was ecstatic. Supramax was a company that made the most advanced ships in human-occupied space. Not affiliated with either side in the Universal War, they built war machines for whoever had the credits to buy them.

“Attention, crew of the *Veruvian*,” boomed Rhule’s voice over the hangar’s intercom system. “This is your captain. All pilots, enter your ships and prepare for the fold jump. All other crew, report to the nearest fold restraints and lock yourselves in. Jump in five minutes.”

Clarissa ran her hand along the outside of the Supramax Hawk. “It’s the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen.”

“She’ll be more beautiful once she’s off the deck,” Wan said as he ran up the ramp. “Let’s move.”

Congo followed.

“Will this do?” Ben asked Clarissa.

“Yeah, I think it’ll do just fine.” She looked awestruck as she headed up the ramp.

“How did we get something like this?” asked Ada.

“Let’s just say the captain is a lover of ships, and brought one of his collection on this mission.”

“And he’s letting us have it?”

“And he’s counting on us to lead every fighter in this hangar.”

Ada chuckled as she walked up the ramp. “No pressure or anything.”

Ben took a moment to admire the Supramax Hawk. “Yeah, sure, no pressure.”

Two minutes later, they were all seated in the cockpit as Rhule’s voice came over the ship’s intercom this time. “Fold jump in one minute.”

“Everyone strapped in and ready to go?” asked Ben.

“One of those things,” answered Wan.

“As ready as we’re ever gonna be,” answered Ada.

“Sure,” answered Congo.

Clarissa sat at the pilot’s chair, admiring the highly-tuned precision instruments in front of her. Despite the situation, she was excited. This was light-years away from anything else she’d ever flown.

“We need to give it a name,” she said.

“*Hawk*,” said Wan.

“Fold jump in thirty seconds,” said an automated voice that had taken over for Rhule.

“That’s lame,” Congo said.

“How about *LeFay*?” suggested Clarissa.

“For the crazy cyborg that got me into all this?” Wan asked sarcastically, but he still managed to look a little wistful, at least for him.

“The *Fallen*,” said Ben. “For Tomas, for LeFay, for Ace, for all the friends we’ve lost in this fight. They deserve to be represented here, at the beginning of the end.”

“I like it,” said Ada.

“Me too,” agreed Clarissa. “The *Fallen*.”

“You can’t give a ship a depressing name like that,” Wan said. “That’s bad luck!”

“Ten seconds,” the voice declared. The automated count continued unabated. “Nine. Eight.”

“Bringing you along is bad luck, but here you are,” Ada said.

“Nonsense,” Wan said. “I’m as good a luck as this universe has.” He paused. “Hey, what do you think the odds are we jump to the Earth and there’s no Shapeless at all? And this is all just a big misunderstanding?”

“What do you think the odds are that you take something seriously?” Clarissa asked.

“Excuse me for trying to bring some levity to our suicide pact here,” he mumbled.

“Five. Four. Three.”

The cockpit went silent as they prepared for the fold jump. Once they came out the other side, they all knew they would face a life or death struggle to save the Earth.

“One.”

SIX

PURE EVIL

LEE CAME out of the fold skip hoping for the best and bracing for the worst.

If his calculations were off and he came up short of the Shapeless home planet, he'd end up in deep space, without enough power or inertia to do much of anything. And if his calculations were off the other way, well, he'd simply cease to exist. He wasn't a fan of either scenario.

But his calculations were good enough, and he came out of the skip a couple of thousand feet above the Shapeless' home planet's surface. The ship adjusted for the atmospheric pressures as best it could, but his forward console looked like one big blinking red light.

The ship was in shambles.

The engine that Chevenko's dreadnought had clipped had exploded seconds after coming out of the fold skip. It had taken the other engines with it, leaving Lee rudderless, gliding towards the surface below at less than safe speeds.

"C'mon, baby, don't die on me!" Lee desperately tried to gain some form of control of his ship, but it was hard with only one arm and no engines.

The ship bucked and bounced on air pockets that he couldn't see. All he could do was hang on and hope that it crash-landed flat on its belly and didn't go end over end.

Lee took a look out the window of his ship's cockpit. The whole of the Shapeless' planet was black. There were what looked like large swaths of volcanic rock, with rivers and lakes of the black oil-like substance he'd grown to hate so much.

Everything about the planet was wrong. For one, it was too small. It wasn't even the size of a standard moon, and nothing in this small system's development should have supported it.

The asteroid belt indicated that this system had once been home to dozens of planets. Now only one tiny one remained, its own existence confirmation that something was different about it at the most basic level.

Keeping his eye on the altitude meter, Lee nervously waited for the crash. He tightened his harness and even put on the magnetic restraints. One leg nervously shook as he waited for the inevitable, all the while assuring himself that he wouldn't fail.

Lee felt a small hand on his thigh, stopping it from shaking. He looked over and saw Ben as a kid, sitting on his mother's lap in the copilot's seat. Neither of them said a word. They didn't have to. It was clear as day on their faces that they wanted to reassure him that he'd be okay.

The first impact was the worst. It was so hard that it jostled the teeth in Lee's mouth. The second still sucked, but was nowhere near as bad. Those first two were on the volcanic rock. And though the ship was far past the point of being flyable even before it hit the ground, it stayed, for the most part, in one piece. It skidded to a stop, with the nose jutting out into a lake of black oil. Lee sat dazed in the pilot's seat as the black oil began to envelop the front of the ship.

CHEVENKO SAT on the floor of his dreadnought's command bridge with his dead daughter still in his arms. He ignored the countless asteroids hitting his ship, denting it, breaking it, and taking pieces of it with them. The shields were completely depleted, but he didn't care.

Lee was just down there on that planet ahead. Chevenko, if he did nothing else in his life, was going to kill Saito, one way or another.

Dragging his daughter's corpse with him, Chevenko returned to his commander's chair. The whole ship was falling apart around him. Pieces of the ceiling fell down, crashing on the floor. Everything was tinted red by the emergency lighting. So lost in his grief and rage, he didn't notice when the constant banging noise of space rocks pummeling his dreadnought stopped.

“You think you can take that from me and live?” Chevenko screamed. He wiped the sweat from his forehead and accessed the dreadnought’s controls. He accelerated, overriding safety protocols as they flared up on his controls, and headed full speed towards the planet.

LEE JERKED HIS HEAD UP. He wiped blood from his forehead as he managed to make his eyes finally focus. He’d been knocked out. For how long, he didn’t know. He quickly unstrapped himself from the pilot’s seat. He looked at the readings from the planet. That there was an atmosphere at all was again peculiar. The tiny planet shouldn’t be able to support one at all. There wasn’t enough breathable oxygen, and there was a high concentration of noxious gases. He’d need a suit to go outside for any extended period of time, which meant going to the back of the ship—a task that was more tricky than he thought it’d be.

As soon as Lee started moving towards the cockpit exit, he realized the ship was shifting. The black ooze was trying to suck the ship down with it.

Damn.

Time wasn’t on Lee’s side. He knew that. So the first thing he needed to do was figure out how to use the nukes. Especially since that task was going to be more complicated now that he couldn’t fly the ship anymore. Which meant he couldn’t just fire one.

Lee took another step. The ship seemed to teeter. For the first time, he wondered if the ship was actually nose into the black ooze or if it was nose off a cliff. The entire topography was strange. All he knew was that if the ship was subsumed by the river of black oil, the nukes and the only chance of destroying the planet went with it.

Lee stepped across the cockpit like he was walking on broken glass. As he moved, the ship creaked and complained, but he was able to make another step, and he was out of the cockpit. Confident that he was now safe to move freely, he headed straight towards the weapons bay.

But the ship continued to shift and moan. It was only a matter of time before it was subsumed. He had to move fast.

Once down the small ladder into the cramped weapons bay—no easy task with only one hand—Lee tried to recall his training from decades ago,

before the war. He'd served on a battleship for almost a year. For half that time, he'd worked on the ship's weapons team, helping arm, load, and even replace missiles, torpedoes, and the cannons.

One of the skills Lee had learned before moving on from a weapons team and becoming a proper officer was rigging a missile to blow without it being fired. At the time he couldn't understand why anyone would be taught that. What possible situation would necessitate blowing a projectile up without firing it? Finally, after over thirty years, that question was answered.

Lee got to work on the nukes, or more accurately, the missiles housing them. It took a little while for him to remember exactly what he was doing. There were so many small energy conduits of different colors. The trick was knowing which conduits to cut, and which to attach to each other. The problem was, he didn't have much time.

Chevenko was out there, and there was no telling what he'd do when he found Lee.

CHEVENKO CRADLED his daughter's body as if she was a baby being put to bed as the dreadnought entered the Shapeless' planet's atmosphere. The friction from entry not only peeled off some of the outer protective layers of his vessel, but also set it on fire.

The whole dreadnought shook violently as it threatened to burn to a crisp before it even reached the planet's surface. All the lights and instruments in the command bridge blinked on and off. Fires broke out all around Chevenko, the flames reflecting off his tears.

If anyone was on the surface of the Shapeless planet looking up, they would've seen a massive fireball screaming across and out of the sky. Pieces of the dreadnought broke off, leaving smoking debris flying off the back. It picked up speed the closer it got to crashing.

"He'll pay ,baby girl. He'll pay for all of—" Chevenko was cut off by a sharp pain in his back and chest. He looked down and saw a grey curved blade sticking out of the front of his rib cage. His own blood dripped off the end.

"I'm sorry, friend."

Chevenko was in such shock and pain that it took a moment for the voice of the yellow-eyed alien to register. He'd forgotten all about his otherworldly prisoner. "You," he sputtered.

"I cannot let you stop him," the creature said.

Chevenko, eyes wide, looked down at his daughter's lifeless face. His own blood dripped off the blade-shaped limb sticking out of his chest, and onto her face. Moving his body became close to impossible. He just sat there, pinned to his seat.

When Chevenko looked up at the viewing window, he saw the black surface of the Shapeless planet rushing up fast behind a filter of flames. The last thing he heard before succumbing to the darkness of death was the alien apologizing one more time.

"THAT SHOULD DO IT," Lee said aloud as he put the finishing touches on rigging the nukes in his ship. He'd set them up so that with one command in his HUD, they would remotely trigger and blow up. The power rating of the nuclear weapons was nothing like the primitive ones that had once put the Earth on the brink of its own extermination. These were many, many times more powerful. True, they weren't in the same league as the planet killers that the AIC and UEF liked to point at each other, but they didn't have to be. The Shapeless world was tiny.

Considering the amount of power packed into those weapons, combined with the large chunk of Herald Stone next to them, it should've been plenty to level the planet. At the very least, it would leave it unstable to the point that its rotation would soon falter and decay.

With that done, Lee had to get his suit and—

"Brace for impact!" the ship's AI said sternly through the intercom speakers.

Brace for impact? What is this crazy ship talking about?

A huge earthquake sent him flying off his feet. The nukes were locked into place, still stowed where he'd been reworking the energy conduits. Even so, they bounced around violently in their housings. If one came loose, it was liable to crush Lee.

"What was that?" he shouted.

“The pursuing vessel has crashed into the side of the planet. It has made a massive impact that may well have begun a—”

The ship shifted again under Lee’s feet, again sending him sprawling. “What now?”

The AI was silent for a moment. By the time it spoke up, he’d figured it out.

The impact had knocked the ship loose of whatever had been holding it in place. It was now succumbing to the black oil.

“This ship is no longer anchored, and—”

“Yeah, got it,” Lee said, cutting off the ship. It would soon be sucked in. Which meant he needed to get out of it as quickly as possible.

Lee quickly climbed up the ladder out of the weapons bay. The ship was shifting fast now. It had already started to slide into the black oil, throwing him off his feet. With only one arm, he had trouble catching himself, so he fell hard, face-first. Undeterred and bolstered by the fear of drowning in the Shapeless’ black oil, he pushed himself up and scrambled towards the space suits hanging near the loading ramp.

As quickly as he could, Lee put on the suit as his ship sank. At the same time he opened the loading ramp, determined to jump out of the ship as quickly as possible. Immediately upon the seal being broken, black oil started to quickly rush into the ship from around the opening loading ramp.

Lee’s suit protected him from the black oil, but as soon as the airtight seal of the ship was broken, all the oxygen rushed out. Lee held his breath as he struggled to put on his helmet with one arm. As the levels of black oil rose, he knew he needed to get out. He looked at the open loading ramp, which extended up in the air as his only way out.

He had to think fast to get out of his current predicament. He tossed his helmet up and out of the ship, hoping that it would hit the lava rock instead of the black oil and not disappear like his ship was slowly disappearing. Because then he wouldn’t be able to breathe, and his mission would end on a pathetic note. Then he jumped up and tried to grab the ledge of the opening loading ramp.

Never in his life had Lee been more thankful for incorporating pull-ups into his regular workout routine. With one arm he grabbed the edge of the opening for the loading ramp. Satisfied that his grip was tight, he gritted his teeth and groaned as he pulled himself up out of his ship. All that working

out paid off as he rolled over on what was actually the side of his ship as it sank.

Not able to breathe, Lee quickly looked around for his helmet. It was on the nearby lava rock beach. Struggling to hold his breath, and feeling like his eyes and face were on fire, Lee got up and ran towards the end of his ship and jumped off. His boots landed hard in the assorted small pieces of lava rock. He scrambled forward and grabbed his helmet.

With one arm, Lee had to concentrate to figure out how to secure his helmet over his head and clamp it to the ring of the suit around his neck. All the while, he had to do so without being able to breathe. He felt light-headed as he worked.

As he choked, Lee's hand struggled to clamp down the helmet. His mouth kept opening and closing like a fish out of water, struggling to breathe. Was this how it ended for him? Suffocation on an alien planet? With a loud pop, the o-ring around his neck snapped into place. The rudimentary automated system within the suit instantly registered that a seal was established in his helmet, and oxygen came rushing in.

Exhausted, Lee fell backwards and lay on the lava rock, looking up at an alien sky.

SEVEN

THE BATTLE FOR EARTH BEGINS

THE *VERUVIAN* CAME out of the fold jump at its pre-set coordinates just beyond Earth's moon. Fold blockers on Earth prevented any unauthorized ships from fold jumping any closer, but it was close enough.

"Visuals," Clarissa said before images appeared on the forward screen of the *Fallen*, fed by a direct feed from the *Veruvian*.

There were six full-sized spherical Shapeless ships hovering by Earth's moon, each about a third the size of it. They were huge. With them were what looked like hundreds of UEF ships. It was a sizable fleet, much bigger than what the AIC were bringing to the table.

Congo gasped.

"I should've run," Wan said feebly.

"Okay, we're the first ones up," said Ben. He felt the remaining nausea and disorientation that came with a fold jump fading away.

"Got it!" Clarissa said. "Taking off now." The *Fallen* lifted up and out of the hangar. They switched to their own forward view, which unfortunately only confirmed what they'd seen. Somewhere in his mind, Ben was hoping something was wrong.

"You've got to be kidding me," Ada said. The Shapeless fleet was beyond anything they'd ever encountered before.

"I guess they're serious about this whole invading and destroying the Earth thing." Clarissa stared, wide-eyed, as she talked.

"This doesn't change anything." Ben buried his nerves. "Clarissa, give me the comms."

"Transferring them now."

“Attention all fighter squadrons. This is Ben Saito, captain of the *Fallen*, Reb-1. I need Reb-2, 3, 4, 5 to form on me. Reb-6 and 7, stay with the dreadnoughts and battleships,” ordered Ben.

The crew of the *Fallen* waited for the dozens of AIC fighters under his command to form up. Meanwhile, Rhule had to organize the rest of the attack. He was in charge of the big boys: the battleships, warships, and dreadnoughts in his fleet. Thorne had arrived, but refused to hand over any control over any of the ships he had left.

“Reb-1,” Rhule said over the comms.

“Reb-1 here,” said Ben.

“Those ships with the aliens. Are those UEF? What are they doing helping them?”

“Those aren’t UEF, sir,” Ben said. He glanced at Ada and she nodded agreement. “They did the same thing on Vassar-1. Those are Shapeless ships. Order your men to fire on anything that isn’t AIC, at least for now. Hopefully we’ll get some reinforcements from the Earth and the moon—”

Ben realized something horrible. They were all counting on more men and vessels from Earth’s moon, since it was traditionally the shipbuilding hub of the UEF, and the last line of defense for their home planet. But if the Shapeless were so close to it, unmolested and mimicking UEF ships, that meant that the moon must have fallen into the enemy’s hands.

“What is it?” asked Rhule after he heard Ben pause.

“We don’t have any help,” Ben quietly responded.

“What do you mean, we don’t have any help?” asked Rhule. “I thought the UEF had a major base and ship port on the moon.”

“I don’t know for sure, but I can feel it. The moon fell. We’re on our own in this fight.”

“What the hell do you mean, we’re on our own?” asked Wan.

“Where are all the UEF ships? They should’ve responded to a threat like this so close to the Earth...” Ada was slowly coming to the same realization that Ben had.

“I don’t like where this is going,” Wan said. “What’s this mean?”

“It means we have to hang on here as long as we can,” answered Clarissa. She turned to Ben. “And hope your old man gets the job done.”

That hit Ben like a shot across the bow, but she was right. “He will,” he said, as much to himself as the others. “One way or another, he’ll come through. Trust me. For right now, though, Clarissa’s right. We need to

occupy these monsters for as long as we can, keep them from going planetside.”

“And if your old man doesn’t get it done?”

“He will,” Ben said.

“Even if he doesn’t,” Ada said, “there’s nothing else to be done. This is where we stop them.”

Wan turned back around. “I was afraid you were going to say that.”

There was a loud boom. It was loud enough to shake the bones of every ship in the combined AIC fleet. When the crews inside saw the source of it, they shook themselves. It followed them.

The Shapeless ship, the one that had stolen the planet killing weapon off Europa and destroyed the moon, arrived through the aliens’ own version of a fold jump. It made its arrival in between the AIC fleet and the moon.

“Well, that’s not good,” pointed out Wan.

“Doesn’t change a damn thing,” Ben said.

“The odds,” Wan offered. “It has to change those.”

Ben ignored him and switched his attention to the squadrons of AIC fighters that were his responsibility to lead. “Okay, Reb Squadrons. We got lots of juicy targets to hit. We’re gonna need to divide and conquer. Squad two and three, remain on me, arm your special payloads, wait until my signal to fire. Four, five and six, be as distracting as possible. Pester the thing, pretend to make bombing runs, give us some time and cover.”

“I might be seeing you soon, babe,” Clarissa whispered under her breath. If the others heard, they said nothing.

Clarissa flew straight towards the undulating liquid sphere of the Shapeless ship. Faux UEF fighters emerged from under the constantly moving surface. Clarissa didn’t fire back, not at first. She just focused on the ship’s shields taking as little damage as possible.

“Why aren’t we shooting back?” asked Wan.

“We’ve got to be patient, trust the other squads,” answered Ben.

“Clarissa’s got it,” reassured Ada as she gripped the arm rest of her seat so hard you could see the white of her knuckles through her fair skin.

“DAMN RIGHT I DO,” Clarissa said. She looked over at her husband, who stood in the cockpit next to her, smiling. He put his hand on her shoulder. “We do,” she whispered.

Clarissa put her money where her mouth was and easily juked and weaved around incoming Shapeless gunfire. When they realized they couldn’t touch her and the *Fallen*, some of the aliens chose kamikaze tactics and tried to fly directly into her.

Clarissa dodged one of the Shapeless kamikaze ships. It continued and hit one of the AIC fighters in their squadron, Reb-1. The resulting explosion rocked the *Fallen* a little, but not nearly enough to take the ship off course. “Crazy bastards,” she muttered under her breath.

“Okay, Reb-4, 5 and 6, time for that covering fire. Two and three, stay close, ready your missiles, time for a run at this bastard.” Ben ordered some cover as his and two other squadrons were going to have a go at the Shapeless moon-killing ship.

The *Fallen* was armed with high-powered cannons, which were typical for a Supramax Hawk, along with a whole cadre of missiles and bombs. Like every other ship in the Reb squads, half of those missiles were repurposed, refitted with incendiary explosives or homemade electric charges at the tip that were designed to shock enough to make the Shapeless target vulnerable to the explosion that came a fraction of a second later—though there were some issues.

Rhule and Thorne’s fleets didn’t necessarily have enough supplies to refit all their fighters with modified missiles and weaponry. They hardly had enough for their flagships to use, so only five of the fighter squadrons were even armed with them. Those were Reb-1, 2, 3, 7 and 8. Clarissa knew that Ben and Rhule had agreed that Reb-7 and 8 would stay behind to help protect the fleet. This was why Ben chose Reb-2 and 3 to follow him on the attack run while the others, armed with just traditional payloads, engaged the enemy’s faux-UEF fighters, which had the traditional weaknesses of their real-life counterparts.

Clarissa stayed on course as cannon fire and missiles flew overhead and from behind as the other AIC fighters engaged the Shapeless faux UEF fighters all around them. Her concentration was absolute as the moon killer got bigger and bigger the closer they got.

“Arm missiles,” Ben said.

Ada was at the tactical board, where she armed two of the *Fallen's* twelve modified missiles on board. "Done."

"Wait for an opening," Ben said. He, like Clarissa, was focused on the Shapeless moon killer. They had to be patient. If they fired too soon, one of the alien fighters would definitely fly over to intercept it, sacrificing itself for the whole.

"On my mark," Ben said over the open comm with the other AIC fighter squadrons.

The second the *Fallen* and the ships in its squadron were clear of the swarm of Shapeless faux UEF fighters, Ben gave the order to fire.

A couple dozen missiles hit the Shapeless moon-killer flagship. Ben, everyone on the *Fallen*, and the fleet that hung back all looked to see if their improvised weapons had any effect.

At first, it seemed like they wouldn't be enough. Each missile that hit did some damage, but not much more than a small surface radius around each impact.

But then the damage started to grow. Those with incendiary properties burned the liquid metal surface, turning that liquid into solid lava rock that spread out in exponentially-expanding patterns from the initial point of impact. Those with electrical properties interrupted the flow of the metallic liquid material it was made of, breaking it open, aliens sucked out into space where the holes were formed.

Ben pumped his fist at the damage to the Shapeless' gigantic flagships. But that joy was short-lived, because now they had the aliens' full attention.

All the Shapeless faux UEF fighters that had been deployed to engage the *Fallen* and the Reb squads changed their forms. Though still made of the same material as the human ships, they now resembled flying knives, super-aerodynamic with sharp, almost bladed ends.

The new Shapeless fighter ships focused on Reb-1, 2 and 3, the AIC fighters that hurt the moon killer. Acting like super high-speed projectiles, they literally flew through anything in their way as they hunted and pursued the squadrons. And they were successful.

"What the hell is happening out there?" Ben heard Thorne's voice on his HUD. The commodore no doubt saw on his screens that his fighters were disappearing off the board, one after the other.

Clarissa had a closer view of the mayhem. The Shapeless fighters, like massive bullets, cut through AIC fighters like they were nothing. As they

emerged from the fire and wreckage of the vessel they just destroyed, they immediately moved on to the next one. But she noticed something in all the slaughter. The Shapeless fighters were so focused on them and the other two squadrons that they ignored the others.

“You seeing this?” Clarissa said. “We’re their only target.”

Ben nodded, seeing it too. He re-opened his comm with the squadrons under his own command. “Reb-4, 5, and 6, get these things off our backs or this will all be for nothing!”

“Tell them to stay back,” said Clarissa.

“What?” Ben was confused by the suggestion.

“We’re the only ship out here fast enough to outrun these things. Have the other squadrons stay back, and try to take as many of them off our back as possible. I’m gonna fly in and make the next attack run alone.”

Ben cocked his head. “We’re not going to do nearly enough damage—”

“We’ll do plenty,” Clarissa said as she turned around and looked at him. “Trust me.”

Ben didn’t like it. That was written on his face. But he did trust her. He trusted everyone in the *Fallen*’s cockpit, except maybe Wan. “Okay,” he said at last. “Do your thing, Clarissa.”

Clarissa locked eyes with Ada. “Get the biggest missile we’ve got ready, and transfer firing control to me.”

Ada’s hands danced over tactical. “It’s all yours,” she said.

Clarissa pushed the *Fallen* fast enough that she separated from the pack of AIC and Shapeless fighters. “Okay, you pieces of shit. This is for my family.”

Time seemed to slow down for her.

“All squadrons hold back,” she heard Ben say over comms. “Provide support only.” Under his breath, she heard him say, “We’re gonna kill this son of a bitch.”

Having a Supramax Hawk was especially useful in this situation. A high-performance ship, really a racer turned fighter, it was faster than ninety-nine percent of vessels in known space. Outrunning the Shapeless fighters was easy, but keeping something that fast under control was difficult.

Clarissa had never flown something that could move this quickly. She struggled a little at keeping it steady as she very quickly approached her target. Her focus was on one of the openings in the Shapeless moon killer’s

exterior, formed from one of the electricity-laced missiles that had hit pay dirt during the first attack run.

Once she was close enough, Clarissa got ready to fire. The opening was just big enough to slip a missile into and hopefully blow the Shapeless ship up from the inside.

Her finger was on the trigger when the moon killer decided to defend itself.

Hundreds of thousands of meteor-sized spikes flew out from the Shapeless moon killer like existence's biggest porcupine. Clarissa, reflexes on point, started to barrel roll towards the target, avoiding most of the potential ship-killing projectiles. More than a dozen cut through, though, hitting the *Fallen's* shields and causing a series of eruptions in her field of view. She saw alerts on her console and ignored them.

Six or seven AIC fighters, caught unawares, were hit and destroyed by them. Even some of the Shapeless fell victim to their own side's weaponry.

Able to keep her nerve, Clarissa and the *Fallen* were now clear and ready to punish the Shapeless moon killer flagship.

She fired her missile.

"Bingo," Ada said as it slipped through the opening in the alien's outer liquid-metal armor. Then Clarissa pulled away hard and raced to go rejoin the other squadrons.

At first, nothing registered as Clarissa kept an eye on the screens in the *Fallen's* cockpit that showed the rear camera feeds.

For what seemed like an eternity, nothing happened.

Then the ship seemed to tremble. A series of flames started to belch out from every opening in the Shapeless moon killer's liquid-metal armor.

Instead of exploding or becoming a huge lava rock floating in space, the Shapeless moon killer simply broke apart.

At first, the pieces seemed to fall away like debris. But then something strange happened. The pieces began to shift and change shape.

Clarissa's heart sank as it dawned on her what was happening. The enormous vessel had turned into hundreds more Shapeless fighters, all of them turning to chase after the *Fallen*.

EIGHT

CLOSING THE CASE

SYDAL COULDN'T BELIEVE his eyes. On his knees, he was on eye-level with his daughter, Rebecca. But it couldn't be her. There was no way it was her.

As the lift door started to close, Sydal caught it with his hand. He was about to push them back open, somewhat expecting that his wife and daughter wouldn't be there this time. Perhaps it was just his imagination, or the tumor acting up. Hallucinations were part of the symptoms, a side effect of the extra pressure on his brain.

Another hand entered the crack in the elevator doors. It was feminine and familiar. It was Maria's hand. She opened the doors back up and knelt down.

"You look like shit, Rowan," she said as she placed one hand on his bloody face.

Sydal started laughing. He couldn't say why, but he completely lost control. The laughter mixed with tears and became a sour strange mixture of emotions.

"You're dead," he pointed out.

Maria smiled and shook her head. "No, I'm right here, with you."

Rebecca walked over in the adorable, slightly clumsy way she often did. She hugged Sydal. He didn't know what to do at first. Anger was briefly added to the mix, but subsided as he felt his daughter's arms wrap around him. He melted.

"Come, I have someone who wants to meet you." Maria took Sydal's quivering hand and stood up. He did the same. Rebecca held his other hand.

Maria led him into the halls of the penultimate floor in the base. Unlike the slaughterhouse a couple of floors below, it looked like a normal, calm office environment. At the end of the hall was an open door that he was being led to.

The room was huge. It was lined with wall-sized windows that wrapped almost all the way around that floor of the base and gave breathtaking views of Earth's moon, the Earth in the distance, and the Lunar Dome.

What the hell is happening out there?

In the sky, gigantic spherical ships made of liquid metal hovered on one side, motionless and intimidating. Another giant spherical ship was being engaged by what looked like hundreds of fighters. Then there was an AIC fleet on the opposite side.

The bald, pale man joined them at the windows. Next to him on either side were what looked like huge black dogs, nearly as tall as him. But they clearly weren't canines, as their jet-black skin moved, tendrils wiggling just off the surface. Their eyes were orange burning coals and their mouths, drooling black oil, were filled with metal teeth.

The incongruity of it all shook Sydal out of his stupor. "Who the hell are you?"

"Your salvation, Detective," said the Pale Man as he petted one of the alien monster dogs. "Or may I call you Rowan?"

"You may not," replied Sydal with hostility.

Maria rested her head on Sydal's shoulder. "Hear him out, honey. Please, for me."

But seeing those dog-like monsters reminded him that she wasn't real. Neither was Rebecca, and his anger returned. Both were dead and this, this was all a cruel lie. He had to stay calm, though, until he got answers.

Sydal's first instinct was to fight, but the detective in him wanted to know why he was being singled out. Why had they gone after his family specifically? Then, when he got his answers, everything would burn.

"What do you want with me?" he asked.

"I want to offer you paradise, Detective. I want to offer you the chance to be reunited with your lovely family and live in peace and happiness forever. Does that sound like something you're interested in?" responded the Pale Man. He walked over towards Sydal, leaving the alien dogs behind.

"Go on," urged Sydal. He tried to ignore his revulsion and rage as the thing pretending to be Rebecca hugged his leg.

“This world that your kind has built. It’s nothing but greed, labor, and violence. How can you want to go on? How is this a reality worth living in? I’ll tell you, it’s not. But your animal instincts, something inside you, it tells you to soldier on, to survive. What if I told you that there was another option? What if I told you that by simply surrendering, I can deliver you to a place without struggle, without strife, without suffering?”

“I’d call bullshit. If this magical place exists, why aren’t you there? Why are you wasting your time with us, with me?”

“Because my job is to deliver people to heaven’s door, not live there. It’s a sacrifice I happily make every day.”

“Look, you bald asshole—can I call you ‘bald asshole’? I’ve seen what your kind do, what your followers do. You’re murderers, monsters. How can the road to heaven be paved with dead bodies?”

The Pale Man’s ever-present smile was unperturbed. “We do what is necessary to facilitate the transition. What is it you humans say? ‘Nothing good in life is free’? The price for paradise is death. Yes, it’s a nasty business, nothing that any of us enjoy. But I assure you it is a necessary evil, a little suffering to never suffer again. Even one as cynical as yourself, Detective, cannot deny that is a fair deal.”

Sydal nodded, careful not to show any emotion on his face. “So why me? Why did you single me out over all the other much more important people on the moon?”

“We didn’t,” replied the Pale Man.

“It sure as hell feels like you did.”

The Pale Man held out one hand. Maria separated from Sydal and took said hand. She wrapped her arms around the alien creep’s waist from the side.

“We were after her. Your wife. Or more accurately, we were after the information in her head. As you know, your wife was UEF military. What you may not have known was the responsibility put upon her by her superiors.”

“What are you talking about?” As far as Sydal knew, his wife had been in the Navy as a former pilot who’d stuck around to help instruct and coordinate—an enlisted woman turned officer.

“She didn’t tell you? I’m not surprised. You humans and your secrets. It’s a wonder you ever actually get anything done.”

“I worked for military intelligence,” said the Shapeless version of Maria Sydal. “There weren’t many of us with access to the codes to arm the fission bombs on every ship based on this moon. Very, very few, in fact. My new friends here, *our* new friends, want those codes.”

“So we took the liberty of liberating your daughter first. Don’t worry, we aren’t the monsters you think we are. Her transition into the Abyss was quick, painless. I made sure of it.”

Sydal felt something break loose inside. He shook with anger at his core. But somehow, he managed to contain himself.

“Painless,” he repeated, his lips pressed in a line, no emotion in his voice. One way or another, he was going to come out on top when this was all over.

“Then we placed a better version of your daughter back in your apartment. Unfortunately, that little rascal had a bit of a temper.”

Ben looked down at the fake version of his daughter still clutching his leg. She looked up at him and smiled a missing-tooth toddler smile.

“She hastened your wife’s transition. Against orders, I may add. Very naughty. So now we need you to get access to her information. Pretty simple, really. Right?”

“I didn’t even know she was military intelligence. That is, if that’s even true. So what makes you think I know the codes to fission bombs? What, do you think she just told me them one day? Over breakfast?”

“No, of course not. Don’t be silly, Detective. But I’m willing to bet you know the passwords to her HUD, her mail, and any of her computer systems.”

“Maybe I do, maybe not. Either way, why would I help you? So you can kill me and replace me with...whatever the hell you things are? You gonna give me fake copies of my wife and daughter?”

“If you give us her passwords, we won’t kill your son.” The smile on the Pale Man’s face stayed, but his tone got much sterner.

Matthew!

Sydal was having real trouble keeping his cool. His voice shook as he asked: “Where’s my son?”

“Close by. I promise.”

“I want to see him. Now!”

“I’m afraid not, Detective. Give us the passwords, and you can not only see him, but we’ll give him to you. It really is as simple as that.”

“What are you going to do with them? The fission bombs?”

“We’re going to wipe the Earth clean of suffering and give humanity the rebirth they so desperately need.”

“Hmmm.” Sydal was smart enough to know the score. He was a detective, after all, and part of the skills that came along with that was being able to read people. He was able to tell if someone was telling him the truth or not. The Pale Man may not have been human, but part of taking the form of one was inheriting those facial tells.

“So what do you say, Detective? Your son for some measly passwords?”

“No.”

“Come again?” The Pale Man’s smile was replaced with a look of shock.

“No, I’m not going to help you. Because...” Sydal tried not cry. “Because you already killed my son.”

“I assure you we haven’t done anything to—”

“You’re a bad liar. You plaster that dumb smile on your face to hide it, but your eyes, your body language, all of them tell me that you aren’t telling the truth. And if Matthew was still alive, there’s no reason why you wouldn’t just show him to me. That’d be the best way to get what you wanted. But you didn’t, because you can’t.” Sydal reached for the flamethrower still strapped to his back.

Before Sydal could aim his flamethrower at the Pale Man, he felt intense pain in the leg that the false Rebecca clung to. He looked down and saw that her arms had turned to something akin to barbed wire, digging into and cutting his skin. Without hesitation, he shoved the business end of the weapon against the creature and pulled the trigger.

Sydal was about to turn the flamethrower on the Pale Man when he felt an even more intense pain in his head. It was too much to take. It felt like something was in his head, trying to burst out from under his skull. He dropped the weapon and fell down to the floor.

“Another problem with you humans is how frail you are. Did you know this is the only place I’ve run into this ‘cancer’? We’ve been to hundreds of occupied worlds over hundreds of lifetimes, and you alone have this weakness.” The Pale Man slowly approached Sydal. He knelt down next to him as the detective writhed around in pain, holding his head.

Sydal’s head hurt so badly he could only grunt in reply.

“That tumor in your head was going to kill you,” the Pale Man said. “I’m just speeding up the process. But first, let’s see if we can dig around in your brain and find those passwords.”

One of his hands transformed into a saw. There was a sinister smile on his face as it neared the detective’s forehead.

The indescribable pain made thinking difficult, but Sydal managed to control his thoughts long enough to kick the Pale Man’s knee as hard as he could.

The alien fell backward in surprise.

Sydal scrambled on all fours towards the flamethrower. Once he picked it up, he swung around in the alien’s direction, spewing flames as he did. But the Pale Man was gone.

The alien thing shaped like Rebecca burnt to a crisp on the floor as the Maria creature rushed towards Sydal, tendrils flailing, shrieking as loudly as she could. He set her alight too, ignoring her screams of pain and pleas of mercy in a stolen voice.

Head throbbing, with blood running down his leg, Sydal stared at the two alien dog monsters, who snarled and growled at him. The first one made its move, charging straight towards him. The other ran off to the side.

Sydal easily dealt with the first one, setting it ablaze, causing it to run away panicked and on fire. It ran into one of the wall-sized windows, bounced off, and fell down dead.

But too late, he noticed the other one had sneaked up on him from behind.

When Sydal swung around, the alien dog grabbed his flamethrower by the middle of the barrel with its massive metal-lined mouth. It easily chomped it in half, making the flamethrower almost useless. Then it lunged on top of the detective.

Sydal somehow managed to use the alien’s own momentum against it, and tossed it up and over himself. Then he took out his pistol and backed up, waiting for the second attack. That was when he noticed that the broken flamethrower, now on the floor, was leaking the highly flammable liquid it spewed.

“C’mon, you big ugly son of a bitch! Come get me!” Sydal walked backwards, stepped over the broken flamethrower, and continued backing up.

The monster let out an ear-piercing shriek and ran straight at Sydal. Despite his nerves, or the pain that had radiated from his head to his whole body, the detective held fast. He waited until the creature was right next to the broken flamethrower, then fired.

Sparks from the bullet hitting the floor ignited the fuel from the broken flamethrower. The creature was instantly engulfed in fire, and within twenty seconds was reduced to a pile of crispy, smoldering remains.

As Sydal watched the flames licking at the creature, the Pale Man reappeared out of nowhere and grabbed him by his throat, lifting him up off the floor with one arm. For once, the Pale Man's smile was gone.

"Just when I think I'd seen the depths of your kind's stubbornness and stupidity, then someone like you comes along, Detective." The Pale Man talked as he walked across the room, still holding Sydal up by his throat. "I offer you the world, I offer you paradise. And what do you do?" He slammed Sydal against one of the wall-sized windows. "You spit in my face."

Sydal struggled to break loose, but between the agony in his head and leg and the Pale Man's brute strength, he couldn't do a damn thing. The Pale Man threw him across the room.

Sydal gasped for air as fresh pain blossomed in his leg.

"The funny and frustrating part of all this, Detective, is that your refusal to play along isn't going to amount to anything." The Pale Man pointed out the window towards the fighting going on in space just above the moon. "They are all still going to die. We are still going to invade the Earth and free all you primitive, barbaric monkeys from the life you deserve. So why continue to resist? Because you're fools. That's why."

The Pale Man walked across the room towards Sydal, who was now mumbling under his breath.

"What are you doing? Praying to your god?" laughed the Pale Man.

Sydal's head felt like it was splitting open. The pain blinded him. Blood trickled out of his nose. In an attempt to stop the Pale Man from torturing him, or at least getting a brief respite, he unloaded his pistol in the alien's face, not stopping until he heard it click.

The Pale Man's face immediately began to reform from a bullet-riddled mess of skull and brain matter to whole again. As it did, the mouth below his grotesquely mangled mug kept talking.

“I’m your only god. The Abyss is all you need to pray to. Remember when I told you that your son is nearby, Detective?” His face still reforming, the Pale Man reached into his own chest and pulled out Matthew’s pale-blue, lifeless corpse. “Well, here he is. Finally! You’re reunited.”

Sydal stared at his dead son. This was no illusion, no alien shapeshifter. This was his Matthew.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered, both to himself and his boy. “I’m so sorry.” His rage was replaced with sorrow and guilt. His heart had come to terms with what he had to do. His body was more than ready to throw in the towel.

“You made one mistake,” said Sydal, just loud enough for the Pale Man to hear him.

“A mistake?” He laughed. “And what would that be?”

“You underestimated just how far a stubborn, stupid barbaric monkey would go to kill alien bastards like you.”

“How do you figure?”

“I wasn’t praying to anyone. I was instructing my HUD to connect to this moon’s exotic matter generator and overload it.”

The Pale Man furrowed his brow.

“Oh yeah,” Sydal spat. “I was in there earlier. I have the access now. And I locked everyone out, so nobody can stop it. So I really hope you enjoy the Abyss, because we’re all about to ride a first-class ticket to Oblivion.”

Sydal smiled through bloodstained teeth as the Pale Man’s smile finally disappeared for good.

“You piece of scum,” the alien spat. “You waste of organic material.”

He turned one of his hands into a scythe and aimed to decapitate the detective. Sydal kicked backward, and the blow skimmed over his head. He rolled over as the Pale Man leapt at him.

This time the alien didn’t miss. The blade slid into Sydal’s chest with a sickly wet thud. Flickers of pain ran through Sydal’s torso.

Then he felt the floor below him tremble. Realization seemed to dawn in the Pale Man’s features as his eyes grew wide.

“Scum,” he said again, but the anger seemed to ebb out of him.

In his mind’s eye, Sydal watched as the bright explosion pushed its way out of the ground where the exotic matter generator was housed. Then

everything got sucked back into the mini black hole that it created.

The world around Sydal went dark. The last thing he heard was the Pale Man unleashing a howl of unintelligible alien sounds before his body, like Sydal's, was ripped apart.

NINE

DESPERATION

“HOW LONG DO you think we can keep this up?” asked Rhule from the *Veruvian*’s command deck. He was speaking to one of his crew in charge of keeping an eye on the shields and the dreadnought’s structural integrity.

“At this rate, I’d guess thirty minutes,” answered the crew member. “At most.”

The whole of the *Veruvian* shook as they took a couple more hits from the Shapeless fighters. They crashed into the dreadnought’s superior shields, but did massive damage each and every time.

“Do what you have to do to extend that. We have to hold on long enough for backup to arrive. Otherwise we’re going to lose this fight.” Rhule then turned his attention to another crew member, one of three in charge of the ship’s weapons. “I don’t want our cannons to stop firing until all this is over. Understood?”

“Yes sir!” answered one of the three.

Rhule got up out of his commander’s chair and walked up to one of the viewing screens. He looked on as all hell was breaking loose outside. The other Shapeless flagships, witnessing one of their own going down, had joined the fight. They, along with hundreds and hundreds of their fighters, were devastating the combined AIC fleet, including the fighter squadrons under Ben’s command.

“Sorry, Ben,” Rhule said under his breath. “I think we’re out of miracles for you.”

“THEY’RE BEATING the shit out of us!” yelled Wan.

“We’ve all got eyes,” Ada snapped. “We see.”

Ben grunted but said nothing. He was doing everything he could to stay out of panic mode, but it was getting difficult. Shapeless fighters were zipping and zooming all over the place, plowing through any ship in their way. They were so reckless that they’d even run into and destroy each other.

Clarissa was the one under the most pressure. Ben left her alone to work her magic. But even with a Supramax Hawk and its superior speed and maneuverability, surviving this mayhem was getting harder and harder. She jumped reflexively as a tumbling fighter whizzed past, forcing her to execute a hard turn. Ben could tell her nerves were starting to fray with every near-collision. Her hands were sweaty, and her artificial eyes darted all over the place, looking for the next threat to come.

“How many of these things are there?” asked Ada as she struggled to shoot down as many of the knife-like Shapeless fighters that she could. The sheer amount of them passing through the *Fallen*’s sights meant she almost didn’t have to aim. All she needed to do was spray, and she was bound to hit a couple.

“Too damn many,” Ben said. “We need to get out of this.”

They had to do something, as the fighter squadrons under his command were losing men and women at an alarming rate. If drastic actions weren’t taken, they’d all be wiped out within minutes.

“How about getting closer?” suggested Congo, her first words in several minutes.

“What?” Wan asked. “Are you losing it?”

Ben frowned over at her. Congo was clearly the odd one out in this little party. Wan seemed to be self-assured to a fault—getting him to shut up was the trick. But the young doctor had largely kept her own council, until now. “What do you mean, Congo?”

“I mean we get in close to their big ships. Maybe these things will be less reckless if they might hit their own”—she waved her hand—“mother ships?”

Ada shook her head. “Maybe. It could be worth a try.”

“Then we can get picked off by those big boys,” Clarissa pointed out. “It’s not like they aren’t powerful. They already blew up a damn moon!”

“Have we seen anything to suggest they have the kind of point-defense systems our own big ships have?” Ben asked, warming to the idea. He

glanced around. "I haven't seen anything like that."

"They might not be equipped for shooting at small fighters like us," Ada said. "They might be damn good at mimicking things, but I've never been too impressed with their strategic thinking."

"Close it is, Clarissa," Ben said. "Bring us too close for comfort." He slapped the comm button on his chair. "Reb-2, Reb-4, on me. We're going in for a run. All other squadrons stay here, protect the fleet. Stay alive."

The Shapeless flagships were on the other side of the moon, safely hurling huge, spiked comet-like projectiles towards the battle and at the AIC fleet from a distance. Though slow enough to be seen and shot before they did any damage, their barrages didn't stop. Eventually two made it through. One completely destroyed a battleship upon impact. Another scraped off the side of Thorne's dreadnought, dealing a massive blow to its shields.

Ben was determined to break the Shapeless' feeling of safety. Once the remains of the second and fourth fighter squadron formed up on the *Fallen*, Clarissa was given the order to speed towards the alien flagships as fast as possible.

"C'mon, you little bastards, follow us." Ben was hoping for the Shapeless fighters to follow. At first they didn't. They continued taking it to the AIC fighter squadrons left behind. "C'mon. Come and get it."

About a minute after Clarissa started to make a run past the moon towards the Shapeless flagships, the Shapeless fighters noticed and started their pursuit. Things were going as planned as the *Fallen* and Reb-1, 2, and 4 attracted the vast majority of the enemy, giving the intended relief to the AIC fleet.

Though happy that their plan was working, Ben was hit with the realization that they were being pursued by too many Shapeless fighters to count. As fast as the *Fallen* was, it wasn't going to be able to avoid and outrun them forever.

"What in the world is that?" asked Ada. She was the first to notice the bright flash on the moon's surface, big enough to be visible from space.

"I have no...Jesus!" Ben saw what everyone else in the space above and around the moon saw.

The moon collapsed in on itself. And it happened at an alarming pace. As the surface inverted inward, a small black hole formed.

Then space began to warp around the moon.

Two of the Shapeless' flagships were the first to feel the black hole's pull. They were too close to the moon's surface. First their outer layer of liquid metal got pulled off into the black hole, revealing the skeleton of the Shapeless vessels, individual aliens being sucked out and in as well.

"Clarissa...turn back," said Ben as he watched the two Shapeless flagships get sucked into the mini black hole.

Clarissa tried turning the ship around, but it was caught in the immense gravitational pull of the mini black hole where Earth's moon used to be. "I can't!"

"What do you mean, you can't?" Ada said with alarm.

"I'm telling you, I can't! It's already too late!" Clarissa tried as hard as she could to pull the *Fallen* out of the black hole's grip, but she couldn't.

"You rookies," Wan said, sounding calmer than everyone else in the ship, which was probably a first for the entire flight.

"What?" Ben asked in confusion.

Wan crossed his arms. "This your first time running into a black hole?"

The cockpit was quiet now as all eyes turned to him.

"You can't fight it, you big dummies," he said. "It's impossible. But what you can do is make it work for you."

"What do you—?" Ben was about to ask Wan to explain himself, but then he saw members of the second and fourth squadron being pulled in as well. They flew past, unable to resist the gravitational forces in any way. "Reb-2, Reb-4, retreat! Retreat immediately! Return to the fleet!"

"No, forward, idiots," Wan said.

"Hurry up and explain, dipshit," Ada snapped.

"It's pretty simple. When you get pulled in it happens kinda like water going down a sink drain. We'll swirl around, getting closer and closer with each rotation. The key is only rotating once, at most. And once you reach the point you wanna get out, then hit a fold skip. Full compression wave. It'll pop you right out. You might even get extra propulsion from the gravitational pull itself."

"You want to fold skip on the edge of a black hole?"

"There's literally nothing to it," Wan said.

"We'd arrive right outside Earth's atmosphere with a good skip," pointed out Clarissa.

"If you can control it," Ada said. "Are you sure of that?"

“We don’t have a choice,” Ben said. He nodded at Wan. “Good idea, Wan.”

“Damn right it is,” Wan said.

“But if we do that,” Ben said, “we’ll completely separate from the fleet and the fighter squadrons. They’ll be all alone as the only thing between the Shapeless and Earth.”

“What choice do you have?” Wan asked. He nodded at the forward screen, and Ben felt a dull pain in the pit of his stomach as the small fighters that had come along with the *Fallen* were powerless to pull away from the black hole and were sucked in. More good men and women gone.

Ben felt anger clawing at his throat. “Do it,” he sharply to Clarissa.

“Spinning up the engines now,” she said. “Everyone strap in. This is gonna be a rough one.”

Ben pulled his restraints tight. He knew that the shorter a fold skip, the sketchier coming out of it could be.

“Fold skip in five...” Clarissa started the count as she still accelerated backwards, trying to fight back as the *Fallen* was slowly being pulled into the inner orbit of the black hole.

“Something doesn’t feel right,” pointed out Ada. She could feel the engines spinning, as anyone on a vessel that size would. But the floor was vibrating. That wasn’t normal.

“Three, two...” Clarissa got ready to initiate the fold jump.

“Wait, maybe we should—”

Ada didn’t get to finish her sentence.

“Initiating fold jump,” said Clarissa right before doing so. There was a loud banging noise from the fold jump engines on the *Fallen*, and they went into the fold.

The *Fallen* came out of the fold skip spinning end over end.

“What the hell?” Wan shouted.

“The local gravity,” Ada said. “It’s not just a black hole. It’s the loss of the moon. It’s wreaking havoc on the gravity here, and the fold must have —”

“Oh God!” Clarissa cut in. “Hang on!”

Instead of being taken to just outside Earth’s atmosphere, the *Fallen* was a couple of thousand feet above its surface.

Clarissa just barely managed to get the *Fallen* back under control as it deployed in-atmosphere stabilizers and shifted to the ram scoop engine to

provide power in Earth's thick atmosphere.

Ben barely managed to keep his nausea at bay. Smoke started to fill the cockpit. "Someone put out that fire!" he yelled.

"Got it!" Congo shouted, unstrapping herself from her seat and leaping up in one motion. After regaining her footing—the fold skip left everyone dizzy—she hurried towards the back of the ship. She was instantly lost in smoke as Ben watched her go.

A few seconds later the smoke began to dissipate. He felt a breeze, and assumed that she'd opened the rear loading ramp to vent smoke. A moment later, Ben's HUD came to life with a message from ... Congo?

He granted her access immediately.

"Ben, we have a problem," Congo said without preamble.

"What is it?"

"I'm at the back ramp and ... well, it's just, aren't you from Annapolis? I mean I've only seen vids, but..."

"But what?"

"Just take a look."

Ben leaned forward. "Clarissa, can we get a clear view of the surface?"

She looked confused for a second, then shrugged. "Sure, I guess."

Clarissa descended below some clouds as she slid her hand over her controls, and the image on the viewscreen shifted.

"What the hell?" Ada breathed.

Somehow, through some twist of luck or maybe fate, they were, as Congo had indicated, just entering the airspace around the state-sized super city of Annapolis.

And it was under siege.

Shapeless fighters zoomed back and forth through the skies above the city, smashing into buildings, detonating on the elevated walkways, and slaughtering civilians as they went. Hovercopters strafed huge spacescrapers at the city center.

It suddenly made sense now, why the UEF hadn't flown out to meet the Shapeless in space. They were too busy trying to fend them off near the planet's surface. Ben had to make a choice. He either returned to space and they continued that fight, or they did all they could to save lives on the ground. It was an easy, obvious choice, but he owed it to Rhule and Thorne to tell them what was going on. He opened a comm channel.

“Ben,” Rhule grunted. “Thought we lost you. Again. How many lives do you have?”

“Running low,” Ben said.

“Hope you have some good news for us.”

“Unfortunately not, Captain. They’ve already reached the surface.” Ben hesitated. “I don’t think any backup is coming, at least not until they deal with the fight down here.”

Rhule was silent for a moment. This wasn’t the kind of news he was hoping for, Ben knew. He knew Rhule wasn’t going to like what he said next, either, but he must have known it was coming.

“We have to stay down here, Captain. We have to help protect these civilians. I’m sorry, I know things are even worse out there.”

“No need for apologies, son,” Rhule said with no pause at all. “Give ‘em hell.”

“I’m sorry, Captain—”

“I said no apology needed. We’ll be fine without you. We were fighting just fine before you showed up.”

Ben knew that they were in no way going to be okay. If something miraculous didn’t happen, and fast, they were all going to die fighting.

“Besides,” Rhule said, “I didn’t like the idea of counting on the UEF anyway. Even if a snake is on your side, he’s still a snake.”

Ben could hear the smile on the captain’s face. Death might be coming for him, but this was the way he wanted it to come.

“Godspeed, sir,” Ben said.

“And you. Rhule out.”

The comm went dead, and Ben returned his thoughts to the horror show unfolding in his home of Annapolis. He was sick watching what was happening, and he was sure that Ada was, too. There were people in those stacked buildings. Thousands were dying every second as Shapeless fighters dove into the city infrastructure with abandon. “Clarissa...”

Ben didn’t even have to finish. “Way ahead of you, boss.” Clarissa pushed forward on the throttle, and the *Fallen* sped towards the city.

Ada wasn’t conservative when it came to ammo usage, pouring fire into everything that looked even remotely alien. As she shot down Shapeless fighter after fighter, Clarissa kept low, close to the buildings, trying to put her crewmate on the trigger in the best positions possible to stop the aliens from purposefully crashing into another structure.

“I’m not sitting here,” Ben snapped as he leaped out of the command chair and hurried towards the ladder that led to the turrets on top of the *Fallen*.

“Abandoning ship?” Wan asked.

“Go to hell, Wan,” Ben said as he shot past.

“I think I’m already there,” Wan said with no hint of sarcasm.

Knowing that every wasted second could mean an untold number more of civilian casualties, Ben moved as fast as he could. As he put on his seat belt, strapping himself into the domed turret, he turned it on.

“Keep this up,” Ben said to the *Fallen*’s crew through his HUD. “We don’t stop until every one of those damn fighters is shot down. Understood?”

Wan gave the least enthusiastic response, but a moment later Ben heard him talking to Ada as he began to take some of the load off her at the tactical board, helping to paint her next targets as they went.

Ben hit a couple of Shapeless fighters as they flew by, slightly leading them so that the rounds from his turret hit their mark right in the middle of the alien vessels. His seat swung around and nailed two more ships behind them. With a three hundred and sixty degree view he could pick off the creatures one by one.

“Animals!” yelled Ben out loud as he saw a hovercopter hovering near one of dozens of small inset side rooftops that dotted the edges of a central spacescraper, the ones that went miles above the super city. Cultists inside it were shooting civilians, who retreated to said rooftop to try to call for safety.

Ben swung the turret towards the hovercopter. His first rounds missed, as Clarissa was flying pretty damn fast. Spooked, the pilot of the hovercopter tried to fly away, but not fast enough. A steady stream of the turret’s rounds blew up its engine and Ben watched, satisfied, as the vessel spiraled towards the city floor.

Clarissa’s artificial eyes rapidly darted all over the place, trying to anticipate and predict the movement of every ship in the air so she could avoid colliding with any of them. The machines implanted in her did the math flawlessly, but it was still up to her to regulate her speed and make the required maneuvers. It was taxing. To make matters worse, there were a hell of a lot of ships. Not only were there Shapeless fighters zooming around in

every direction, but the city sentinels did their best to fight back with their cruisers. And slowly but surely, the UEF military did start to respond.

About thirty UEF fighters, the legit human version, had joined the fight at that point. It wasn't much. They were in no way prepared. But they took some of the attention off the *Fallen*.

"Attention UEF ships! UEF ships, please respond!" Ben opened up all military communication channels he remembered from his days as an officer. "Please respond! You need to know what you're up against!"

"Unknown ship, this is Corporal Holt. Identify yourself! How do you know this channel?" a woman's voice replied back on Ben's HUD.

"This is former...hold on." Ben saw two Shapeless ships bearing down on a poor hapless City Sentinel cruiser. He shot them both, the second just in time before it took out the cops. "This is former Lieutenant Commander Ben Saito."

"Former?"

"That's not important. You need to listen to me. These things that are attacking the city, they aren't human. You can't try to engage them like terrorists or rebels."

"Not human? Then what exactly are they, 'former' Lieutenant Commander Ben Saito?" she asked mockingly. "Alien?"

"Yes. But that's not important. What is important is that you get in contact with all the other bases worldwide. We need a coordinated counterattack or these things are going to reduce everything to ash. Just like Vassar-1."

"What do you think we're doing? Sitting on our hands?"

"You're losing! Badly. And I know you saw what just happened to the moon. Trust me when I tell you the Earth will be next."

Ben didn't try to explain the details. Hell, he didn't *have* the details. He didn't really think what had happened on the moon was done by the Shapeless. They'd been caught off-guard as much as everyone else. But whatever it was, it was a fine metaphor for what was going to come to Earth. There were more of those Shapeless motherships out there. And one only one of them could do all the damage needed to destroy the planet.

Corporal Holt was silent for a moment. Then she broke that silence with somber unwelcome facts. "We're doing the best we can. Most of the docks in and around the city have already been hit. Haven't been able to scramble

many fighters, only those on airstrips or that were already out on training exercises or patrols.”

“How about the City Center Docks?” asked Ben. He was referring to the largest docks in Annapolis that not only housed fighters, but also battleships and even dreadnoughts.

“Haven’t been able to....cultist sons of—!” From Corporal Holt’s line Ben could hear gunshots and shouting. Then the line went dead.

“Clarissa,” Ben said in his HUD, “I need you to go check out the damage to the City Center Docks. Ada should know the way.”

The Fallen shifted quickly and slipped through a handful of buildings as Ben fired on every Shapeless craft he saw along the way.

When they got to the City Center Docks, Ben’s heart sank. The biggest UEF ship dock in Annapolis was in flames, black smoke rising into the air in a colossal plume. The cultists and Shapeless must have hit it first to prevent the hundreds of ships inside from coming out to respond to their threat.

“Dammit!” Ben had been really hoping that there was something left there.

The battle wasn’t going well. He looked around through the thick bulletproof glass dome of the *Fallen*’s turret and saw nothing but destruction. Spacescrapers and apartment towers were missing windows where flames and smoke bellowed out. Even from the sky in an airtight ship, he heard screaming and yelling. City Sentinel cruisers either crashed into the endless skyline full of buildings or through the elevated walkways that connected them. More and more Shapeless fighters flew in from above, making the odds even worse.

“We can’t take them all on, Ben,” Clarissa said.

She was right, of course. And who knew how long she could keep up her virtuoso piloting? But they had to try.

“We don’t stop,” Ada said with venom in her voice. She sounded so angry that she was actually chewing on the words before she spit them out over the radio. “We take out as many as we can until we’re dead.”

Ben felt somehow energized by her simple proclamation. “We just need to hold on,” he said.

“For what?” Wan asked. “A miracle?”

“If that’s what it takes,” Ben said.

The line went silent before Clarissa sighed and spun the ship around back the way they'd come, deeper into the city under siege.

"C'mon, Dad," Ben whispered to himself. "If you're gonna save us, it's now or never."

TEN

A HERO'S DESTINY

LEE LAY down on the lava rock surface of the Shapeless' home planet. He stared up at the sky, looking at three moons. But they weren't bright like Earth's, or even green like Europa. All three were blood red.

Coming into Lee's view was the occasional but steady sight of Herald Stones being fired up into orbit. Black oil dripped off them as the dark mini comets sped towards the atmosphere. He was so tired, so sore, but he had a job to do.

Lee crawled up off the ground. His breath came shallow inside the spacesuit. As he looked over the vast ocean of black alien oil, he saw the Herald Stones propelled upward by some force of this planet's nature that was completely beyond him.

He checked the connection in his HUD. The nukes might have gone in with the sunken ship, but they were still responding to his HUD. He could still detonate them.

Lee prepared to give the command. He'd always known this was a one-way mission. He was at peace with it. He didn't want to kill himself, but he knew he had no choice. These alien monsters had to be stopped.

"Have to be stopped," agreed a whispering voice in his head.

Lee spun around, expecting to find someone right behind him, but he was all alone.

He frowned as he replayed the voice in his head. It was familiar to him for some reason, even though he couldn't place it.

"Have to be stopped," the voice repeated. It seemed to come from behind him this time, from the oily ocean beyond.

Lee walked over to the edge of the black oil and knelt down.

He reached out to touch it. To his surprise, the oil reached out for him in return. In a way, it was beautiful. It really was. Putting aside his absolute hatred for the Shapeless and his determination to end them, they were astounding.

“It is beautiful, isn’t it?” This time, the voice didn’t whisper. And in the deep pitch, realization dawned on Lee. It was his own voice.

He turned around, but still nothing was behind him.

But when he turned back, he found that the black oil had formed a shape that reflected his own, right down to his own face looking back at him.

“It is,” agreed Lee.

“You don’t need that,” the other Lee, the imposter Lee, said, nodding at him. “Not anymore. Not since you stopped being strictly human.”

“What? My helmet?” Lee chuckled. “Nice try.”

“If we wanted to kill you, Lee, you would have died back on the *Atlas*.” The imposter stepped forward, slowly rising out of the black oil, in full uniform.

“If it’s all the same to you, I’m going to keep my helmet on.” Lee backed up and took out his pistol as he did so.

“What are you doing here?”

“What do you think?”

“You want to destroy us? Destroy this place?”

“Of course I do.”

“But you’d be destroying the cradle of heaven. You’ve seen what we can offer, not only to you but to anyone who has ever lost anyone. We will bring families back together. Reunite widows and widowers with their beloved dead. Grieving parents will see their children again, and vice versa. What is it that’s so bad about that, that you want to deny all humanity that peace, that closure?”

“It’s murder, for one,” Lee said.

His doppelganger scoffed.

“Secondly, these lost loved ones you offer aren’t real. They’re faint memories molded out of vile clay that will never match the complexities of the real thing. And third, this Abyss you speak of, that you seem to worship, it’s not real.”

This time the imposter Lee cocked his head.

“That’s right,” Lee said. “I was shown what it is. It’s nothing more than mental manipulation, an ability your kind stole from another. So you’re

murders, thieves, liars and deceivers. And you want everyone to just let you take over the universe?”

“Liars? Deceivers? Murders? Are these not all qualities that can be attributed to humans? Why are these qualities okay for yours but not mine?” The imposter Lee was fully out of the black oil now, having emerged from it and walked across it to the lava rock surface of his planet. The oil began to recede off of him and instead of a strange black silhouette, Lee found himself looking at a perfect replica of a younger version of himself.

“We’re far from perfect,” Lee growled. “That’s true. But we try to be better. That’s the difference. Your kind have accepted being monsters and embraced it. We struggle to be better than we were the day before.” He held his pistol in his hand, finger on the trigger.

“Really?” The imposter Lee laughed. He pointed to the gun. “Is that trying to be better? Admit it, we’re not so different. At least when we kill, we do so to deliver someone to a better place, a better existence. But you, you kill out of anger, vengeance, and justice. Which is worse?”

The sound of gunshots exploded across the alien landscape. The young imposter took a couple of bullets to the face and chest. He fell down to one knee, as the wounds were still open and smoldered. They were incendiary rounds.

Lee looked down at his gun in stupefied shock. Had he fired somehow?

But there was no smoke coming out of the barrel. There wasn’t gunpowder on the gloves of his suit. He hadn’t shot.

Then who had?

The imposter Lee started laughing in between moans of pain. He stood back up, changed form into the Pale Man. Still, the holes blown in him stayed open. Two more shots in his knees sent him back down to the rock.

“Stay the hell down, you slimy alien prick,” bellowed another familiar voice from further down the rock-strewn slope.

Lee turned to see Chevenko in a bright orange space suit, holding a rifle.

“Our deal is done!” Chevenko screamed. “It’s over.”

Shocked, Lee backed up out of the way. He raised his pistol and pointed it at his former friend, but he didn’t pull the trigger. And Chevenko didn’t seem to care that he had a gun pointed at him.

Chevenko walked past a shocked Lee, up to the Pale Man. He pointed his rifle directly at the Shapeless' head. "Consider this a resignation." He fired two more shots directly into the Pale Man's forehead. The Shapeless crumpled down, dead.

"Don't move!" Lee kept his pistol pointed at Chevenko, who slowly turned around.

"Or? What can you do to me, Lee? You already killed my daughter." Chevenko raised his rifle and quickly fired, before Lee could react.

Lee felt a terrible burning in his gut. He looked down. Smoke and blood spilled out from a hole in his suit and stomach. When he tried to back up a little bit, he tripped over his own feet and fell down.

"What more can you take from me? You were supposed to be my friend." Chevenko was beyond out of his mind. Grief and head trauma had taken its toll on him. He was as far from the man that Lee had known and been friends with as possible.

"You tried to kill me." Lee struggled to get the words out as the bullet still burned in his stomach. He didn't think of it at the time, but what the Pale Man had said earlier was true. There were no issues at all for him breathing, even though his suit had been breached.

"Apparently I didn't try hard enough." Chevenko fired again. His second bullet hit Lee in the chest, puncturing a lung.

Lee coughed up blood in his helmet. He used what little strength he had to take it off. It became hard to breathe, and not only because of his new injury. The helmet itself felt suffocating, especially since he knew that he didn't need it.

"Because of you..." Chevenko stood over Lee. "My daughter, my Anastasia, is gone. Sorry, my old friend, but I can't just let that go."

If you kill me, then it's all over. Humanity is doomed, dead. Don't be an idiot!

Lee wanted to say the words, point out to his former best friend that killing him would doom all of humankind, but his punctured lung made that difficult. And even if he could speak, it was doubtful that any words would've stopped the crazed admiral.

Lee managed to raise his pistol just enough to shoot Admiral Chevenko in the shin. The bone was instantly shattered. Chevenko screamed out in pain and fell to the ground in front of Lee.

Unlike Lee, Chevenko didn't have the same alien influence in his body chemistry. Immediately he started to choke on the Shapeless planet's air entering his suit. Add that to the agony of getting his shin bone shattered, and he was in a bad way.

Lee grimaced hard as he managed to pick himself up off the ground to one knee. Blood dripped out of his mouth and his two bullet wounds. His breathing got shallower, with only one lung doing all the work. He could feel the life leaving his body.

The lights were starting to fade. Lee couldn't talk, which meant that he couldn't order his HUD to remote-detonate the nukes in his mostly sunken ship. He was going to fail.

I'm going to fail. They're all counting on me and I'm going to die at the damn finish line.

All Lee could think about in that moment was that his father had been right all along. He would never amount to much of anything. His medals, his achievements in the war, they meant nothing. Because when it came down to it, he was a failure who might as well have ended up working alongside his dad in the docks. At least then he wouldn't feel the weight of his monumental failure on the Shapeless' home planet.

"You haven't failed yet, friend Lee." Just as the lights started to dim, Lee heard that cold, slightly creepy alien voice. It was the alien with glowing yellow eyes, who somehow stood right next to him.

How?

"Sorry about this. I was the one responsible for what happened to this poor deluded man's daughter, but not on purpose. Now, to make up for it, I'm going to make sure that friend Lee survives, to finish the job." The yellow-eyed alien put his hand on Lee's shoulder.

What are you doing?

"I'm saving you so you can save life itself."

Lee suddenly felt a cold rush throughout his body. The yellow-eyed alien had sacrificed himself by forcing the former commander's body to absorb him once again. The holes in him started to fill in. His lung reconstructed itself.

With his newfound strength, Lee stood up. Chevenko, choking on the Shapeless planet's atmosphere, still managed to transition to sitting down and facing his former friend. He picked up his rifle, mouth opening and closing like a fish out of water, as he struggled to find any breathable air.

Lee wasn't worried, though. Absorbing the yellow-eyed alien, even though it wasn't his idea, gave him a sense of calm. Seeing what was behind Chevenko helped ease any fears of being shot again.

The Pale Man rose up again out of the ocean of black oil. He stood on top of the liquid, right behind Chevenko. The creature's head became disfigured, unnaturally large, like a python dislocating its bottom jaw. With a mouth full of razor-sharp, shark-like teeth, the Pale Man bit down on the admiral's head, ripping it in half.

"I see you have a passenger again." The Pale Man, blood covering his mouth and chest, again decided to try and engage Lee in conversation.

Lee had no desire to talk. He just stared at the Pale Man. His thoughts wandered to his son, to Ben. Though he'd given his word that he'd try everything he could to return to him, it was very clear that wasn't going to happen.

"So now we have to deal with two traitors? And in case you were wondering what I meant by 'we'."

Lee felt pressure in his stomach. He looked down and saw a black blade sticking out of one end. He felt more pressure in his chest as another blade entered through there. The yellow-eyed alien had taken away his ability to feel pain, which was a gift.

The two blades belonged to Lee's parents, respectively. They'd been conjured up out of the lake of black oil, the goo still dripping off their nude bodies. His father stood behind him, his mother to his side. Lee smiled.

"Thank you," said Lee.

The Pale Man changed his form into Lee's wife. Behind him were all the soldiers, friends, and civilians that had died over the course of Lee's life. They stood nude on top of the black oil ocean, staring and smiling at him.

"For what?" asked the Pale Man in the form of Lee's wife, Beverly, as he inched closer, propelled by a tentacle attached to his back that jutted out of the black oil.

"For letting me see them one last time. HUD, activate remote detonation." For the first time since they'd encountered each other, Lee was the one with a wide Cheshire smile, and the Pale Man was distressed.

Ben...I'm sorry.

An apology was the last thought that went through Lee's mind as there was a bright flash. He closed his eyes.

WHEN LEE REOPENED HIS EYES, he was walking through the streets of Annapolis. It was a perfect night: warm, but not hot. Cool, but not cold. On his arm was his wife. Beverly rested her head on his arm as her high heels clicked on the elevated walkways of the city. Their bellies were full of dim sum; their mouths still tasted and smelled of alcohol.

“Where are you taking me?” asked Beverly, almost falling asleep on her feet. It’d been a wonderful but long date night.

“Do you trust me?” asked Lee.

Beverly looked up at her husband, confused by the question. “Of course I do, honey.”

Suddenly the lively elevated streets of Annapolis were empty. It was just Lee and Beverly. Just ahead, through the forest of skyscrapers and gargantuan apartment towers, there was an opening. The couple walked towards it.

When they reached the opening, there were no more buildings ahead of Lee and Beverly. There was no city. There was only open space, and the millions of stars that inhabited it.

“What is it?” asked Beverly as she wrapped one arm around Lee’s waist.

The first thought Lee had was that it was the Abyss. After everything he’d been through, all the fighting against the Shapeless, he’d still ended up where the aliens wanted him and all humans to be. But then he saw one of the stars in the distance get brighter and flash yellow for only a few seconds. All those fears went away.

Lee pushed up his wife’s face by her chin and planted the most passionate kiss he ever had on her. She reciprocated. In that moment, even if all existence disappeared for him, he’d be fine. He’d found heaven in her lips. It was something he’d yearned so much for since she died.

“What was that for?” asked Beverly. “I’m not complaining, just...”

Lee smiled at his wife, then looked back out at space. “You know what this is? It’s hope, Beverly. It’s hope.”

Space lit up bright, like the flash of a nuclear bomb. He hugged Beverly, rested his forehead on hers. Finally, finally he could rest, knowing that he hadn’t failed.

ELEVEN

THE END GAME

RHULE SAT ALONE, except for his two guards, on the command bridge of the *Veruvian*. The red emergency lights painted a grim picture as sirens blared. He stared out the viewing screens at the catastrophe unfolding in the space outside.

“I ordered an evacuation,” Rhule said. He’d ordered it as soon as the *Veruvian*’s shields were fully depleted.

“I know, sir,” answered one of the guards.

“Then why are you still here?”

“We’re not just going to leave, sir. Orders be damned,” answered the other guard.

“If you stay here, you’ll die,” said Rhule. It was the truth. He knew that there was no way, barring some miracle, that he’d survive this battle. Nor would his beloved *Veruvian*.

When neither man spoke, Rhule sighed. “Okay. Look out there, tell me what you see.”

The guards hesitated for a moment. Then one of them spoke up. “I see a battle, sir.”

“Look harder.” Rhule stared at the viewing screens, which flickered on and off with each jolt the *Veruvian* got from Shapeless ships colliding with it. Battleships fell, one after another, unable to take the bombardment from the alien flagships that hurled every imaginable non-explosive projectile they could come up with. At the same time the kamikaze fighters took chunks of even the biggest vessels with them each time they flew into one.

“We’re losing, sir,” said the other guard.

“I see hope,” Rhule said.

The two men exchanged a look.

“Not for us. We’re screwed. But for humanity. What I see when I look out that window is humankind fighting for each other despite being lifelong enemies. I see hope. I see the end of the Universal War.”

One of the guards pointed. “I see that they’re moving.”

Rhule followed his gaze and frowned. He was right. Several of the Shapeless flagships were on the move. They were moving towards Earth. That couldn’t be allowed.

He slapped the comm button on his chair. “Anyone that can hear me, listen up. This is Rhule of the AIC *Veruvian*. Those alien ships are heading towards Earth. We can’t let that. Do everything, and I mean *everything*, in your power to try and stop them. It’s been an honor. And hopefully we’ll see each other on the other side.”

Rhule leaned back for a moment and rubbed his temples. This was it. He knew what he had to do, if he could actually pull it off.

“If you want to change your mind and get out of here, now’s the time, guys,” warned Rhule as he took the *Veruvian* off its auto-piloting system. It had been decades since he’d actually been behind the sticks.

Neither guard answered.

“Okay. Well, at least take a seat. Might as well be comfortable when you die.”

Rhule shifted the controls and sent the dreadnought on a direct line for one of the Shapeless flagships. He recited a silent prayer, then pushed the thrusters to their maximum capability.

Naturally, the Shapeless noticed a huge ship like a dreadnought flying straight towards one of their flagships. A good chunk of their fighters still out in space immediately came after the *Veruvian*.

“That’s right, you sons of bitches. Follow me. But you’re not gonna catch me.” Parts of the ship were being blown apart by Shapeless fighters, who swarmed around it like angry wasps, but Rhule didn’t care.

Though they were significantly faster than the *Veruvian*, the Shapeless fighters were much too small to stop a desperate dive like this. They were able to crash into the dreadnought, but the amount of damage they did was insignificant. The massive ship was just able to fly right through them.

Twenty seconds away from colliding with the Shapeless flagship, Rhule was at peace with his decision. He was going to die. And it was a death to be proud of, a good soldier’s death.

But the Shapeless had a habit of making everything difficult. Just seconds from impact, Rhule saw something he couldn't believe. The liquid metal surface of the alien ship shifted all to its rear. That liquid metal turned into a large spiked barricade that instantly skewered the *Veruvian*. The guards, unrestrained, were thrown out of their seats.

Control panels exploded in the command bridge. Pieces fell off the ceiling. All the viewing screens went black. System after system began to fail. The dreadnought was quickly losing air. The guards picked themselves up and turned to fight the fires in the command bridge, but Rhule didn't budge. One way or another, he was going to destroy that damn alien ship.

Every captain in charge of a dreadnought had the authority to self-destruct their ships. No one had ever actually used that measure before—at least, not since the very beginning of the war with the UEF.

Rhule already had it ready. He'd expected to use it the moment before the dreadnaught collided with the Shapeless ship. But this would have to do.

Rhule felt the fire in the pit of his stomach as the computer confirmed his order. He stood up.

"Execute," he breathed.

The great dreadnought complied.

THE *FALLEN* WAS in the middle of a shitstorm of Shapeless fighters, cultist hovercopters, and a city under siege. Conditions in Annapolis were getting worse by the second.

Ben, still on the turrets, couldn't understand how no matter how many ships he shot down, twice that number would appear in the skies above the city. It was an impossible battle. Still, he kept firing. Clarissa somehow managed to keep them flying, and Ada was responsible for twice as many destroyed Shapeless as he was, Ben reckoned.

But they just kept coming.

"We've got a problem!" Clarissa snapped over her shoulder.

"Just one?" Wan said sarcastically from the chair next to Ada.

Even Congo, who'd been trying to help Ben keep the turret from jamming, seemed bewildered. "What now?"

“Look up,” Clarissa said simply.

Ben, up in the turret, had the best view. It would have been quite a show at any other time.

There were several gigantic fireballs bearing down on Annapolis.

“Those are Shapeless flagships,” Ben breathed.

“Looks like we’re out of time,” Ada said flatly.

Ben racked his mind, looking for any possible solution. But sometimes there just wasn’t one. He was thoroughly screwed, and knew it. That was only made worse by what he saw next.

The Shapeless flagships had created a shield over themselves, made of what looked like lava rock. As soon as they were done passing through the atmosphere, their outer shells cracked and fell off. Those were several tons’ worth of thick rock in each piece, crashing down into Annapolis, crushing buildings and killing an untold number of civilians inside.

Then the liquid metal of the Shapeless ships opened up and presented what looked like the planet killing weapon found on Europa. They must’ve copied it and equipped each flagship with the destructive ability to level the Earth. Things had just gotten much, much worse.

“We have to take out those ships,” said Ben, completely lacking any and all enthusiasm, perhaps because he knew it was an impossible task.

Clarissa sighed. “Agreed.”

“Good,” Ada growled. “Then let’s do it.”

Ben wished he had a plan, but all he could do was throw out a suicidal plan and pray that his father would complete his mission before they all died. “Ada, we have any alien killers left?”

“We do. Three missiles, about a hundred incendiary rounds left for our cannons,” answered Ada.

“That’ll have to do. I’m coming back down.” Ben turned off the turret and climbed down the ladder back into the ship proper. He hurried back into the cockpit.

Most everyone in the cockpit of the *Fallen* had similar looks on their faces. They all knew that this was the end. Congo looked scared. Wan too, but he hid it better. Clarissa just looked tired. And Ada, well, she looked angry, and Ben liked that.

“Okay.” Ben strapped into his captain’s seat. “We all know this is crazy. Everyone cool with that?” He didn’t wait for an answer. “Great. Clarissa, take us to those ships. Let’s remind them what it means to be human.”

Ada actually smiled. “Living on borrowed time anyway,” she said. “So let’s make it count.”

CLARISSA OPENED up the scoop thrusters to maximum power as the *Fallen* flew towards the incoming wave of Shapeless ships. None of the alien fighters followed. Most likely they just didn’t see one Supramax Hawk as a serious threat. They were right, she thought. No matter how determined the crew was, there was no way they could take out even one of the flagships, let alone several.

“I love you.”

Clarissa glanced up at Blake, standing next to her chair. She felt his hand on her shoulder and it warmed her all over. She knew this wasn’t real—it was some trick the Shapeless had done—but she didn’t care. Not anymore. “I know. I love you too. And I’ll see you and the kids soon.”

She glanced around at the others, and could only guess at what they were thinking. Ada must have been thinking about her family back in Stockholm. She’d told Clarissa about her home once. About the fjords and the farm she grew up on. It sounded beautiful. Clarissa wished she was going to live long enough to see it.

Congo and Wan were a closed book. She knew hardly anything about them, and she regretted that now.

And then there was Ben. She’d gotten him into all of this, hadn’t she? Convinced Ace to take a chance on him back when she was Morgan and she was still a covert on a mission. Picked him out because he had access she needed to get the job done. And because he had the famous father, the one that everybody thought was a hero. *The son hasn’t turned out too bad either*, she thought.

She and Ben locked eyes for a moment. She’d only cared about the Oblivion back then because she’d wanted to save AIC worlds. She wouldn’t have cared if they’d attacked Earth first; she’d even wished they would, so the AIC would have more time. But things hadn’t gone that way and instead, here she was, her own mission ruined, and back on Earth, trying to save it instead. And she’d dragged Ben into this whole thing.

Ben nodded, perhaps understanding something of what was going through Clarissa's mind at that moment, and then she turned back to her controls, feeling the weight of all the choices that had brought her to this moment. She owed it to Ben to keep him alive. To keep all of them alive.

"Wait," Ada said abruptly. "Wait." Her gaze darted around the tactical console. She slowly stood up, still pointing down at her console. "Are you seeing this on the radar?" Her head shot up, and she stared at Clarissa. "Tell me you see that."

Clarissa looked down and saw it, too. Blips on the *Fallen's* sensor reading. Lots of blips. Hundreds of them, then thousands. Then they merged together into a cloud that the sensors couldn't parse.

"What is that?" Ben asked. He was standing up now, too.

"Ships," Clarissa breathed. She looked up. "From the surface. Thousands of them."

She swiped her hand so the viewscreen image showed the *Fallen's* rear cameras. She saw countless human ships following them up towards the Shapeless flagships.

Try as she might, she couldn't keep a little giddiness out of her voice. "Looks like we got some backup."

Ben dropped back into his chair, looking stunned. Had he really expected that his plea for the UEF to rally to Annapolis would produce this? The look on his face suggested the answer.

But here they were. There weren't only UEF ships, though. Clarissa saw civilians, city sentinels, anyone who had a vessel choosing to join the fight.

"Now that's a sight," Wan said.

"It damn well is," Ben said. His voice turned firm. "Now let's give these alien assholes hell!"

No doubt grasping the sudden surge of opposition in the sky, the Shapeless fighters attacking the city broke off and roared back in pursuit to protect their flagships.

At the same time, thousands of Shapeless fighters came screaming through the atmosphere like flaming rain. They flew straight down towards the human fleet, with no intention of stopping.

The real battle had just started.

Clarissa managed to dodge the initial onslaught of Shapeless fighters, who tried their damndest to fly through the Supramax Hawk. Though they missed the *Fallen*, hundreds of the ships below them weren't so lucky.

Caught in the crossfire from below and above, on both sides, hundreds of Shapeless and human ships blew up, were disabled, or were destroyed in the first seconds of fighting. Then everyone broke off into their own personal dogfights, and the sky was soon buzzing with cannon rounds and missiles flying in every direction, lighting up the sky. Clarissa had to do her best not to get hit while flying through this ever-changing aerial maze of death.

The *Fallen* finally made its way through the thick of the fighting and targeted the nearest flagship. Ben ordered every customized missile on board armed, and incendiary rounds loaded into the cannons. They were going to make a run at it.

So focused was Clarissa on the single Shapeless flagship ahead of her, she failed to notice a line of the enemy fighter ships coming together. Then another joined them, and still another. The forms of each ship melded into the next one.

Now none of them could fail to see it.

“You gotta be kidding me,” Wan said bitterly. “I hate the universe.”

The huge melding of ships formed a small liquid-metal ball that looked like a miniature version of the flagships; then it changed shape again. It grew a pair of huge wings, with undulating tendrils trailing behind them. The center of the mass elongated and formed a featureless blob of a face, with a mouth full of rocket-sized razor-sharp teeth.

The tendrils quivered and the wings flapped and what Clarissa could only call a giant flying monster let out a shriek so loud and high-pitched it put a crack in the *Fallen*'s viewing window.

“Let's stay away from that,” Ben said.

But as they watched, the elongated head turned and pointed its gaping mouth at them. It screamed again and started to dive straight for them.

“I don't think we have a choice!” Clarissa said, banking hard to keep ahead of the flying abomination. It was at least four times as big as the *Fallen*.

“Dive for the deck,” Ben said. “Take it away from the other fighters.”

Clarissa began picking up speed as she dove, but the Shapeless monster kept pace.

“What do we do when we get back down to the surface?” Wan asked. “Are we going to ask it to fly away?”

“We’ll figure it out later,” Ben said. Then he opened a wide channel the UEF used and started broadcasting on all frequencies. “Attention! Can anyone hear me? Who’s in charge down there?” He kept repeating this over every military channel he knew until finally he got an answer.

“This is Commodore Grant, from the LA Base,” answered a stern man’s voice from the other end of Ben’s HUD. “This Ben Saito?”

Ben was surprised that this commodore he’d never met before knew his name. He’d ask questions later. Right now he needed to stick to business. “Commodore, I need you to take your fleet and focus on those big ships up there. They have weapons capable of blowing the whole damn planet. We’ll take care of whatever the hell this ... thing is.”

“I don’t think that’s wise, Mr. Saito. How are you going to handle it alone?”

“We’ve faced down worse, Commodore. Please, those flagships need to go now. They’re your priority. Are your ships armed for that?”

“Rhule filled us in. We’re all armed just fine, if his intel is accurate.” Grant paused, like he couldn’t believe he was talking about trusting AIC intel. Then he pressed on. “If you’re sure about this, I’ll give the order.”

“Do it,” Ben said, then cut the comm.

“Wait, where the hell are they going?” Wan asked as he watched the human fleet fly right past them towards the Shapeless flagships above.

“The bigger question,” Clarissa said as the hulking bird-like Shapeless creature came closer and closer to them, “is what the hell are we doing?”

TWELVE

THE END

“WE NEED A PLAN,” Clarissa said as she tried her hardest to outrun the Shapeless thing that was hot on their tail. Whatever the advantage this giant flying-monster form gave these Shapeless, they were making better use of it than Clarissa had hoped. It was fast.

“I agree,” Ben said. “Anybody got one?” He waited a beat, then started to climb out of the command chair. “I’m going to go back up to the turret and see if I can keep this thing off of us.”

“Like hell you are!” Wan said. “You stay here and get us out of this damn mess. I’m going up top.” He unstrapped and headed back and up to the turret.

“Clarissa, is there any way to get behind this thing?” Ada asked.

“Let me see what I can do.” Clarissa took a sharp turn around a building and into the heart of downtown Annapolis.

Though skyscraper apartment towers and buildings that touched the clouds were common place in a super city like Annapolis, downtown was another matter altogether. The concentration of buildings was much denser, and there was a lot less room to maneuver. That seemed to be what Clarissa was counting on.

The giant Shapeless eagle creature let out a loud shriek. That sound was so high-pitched it shattered the windows of the skyscraper Clarissa was flying past, sending shards of broken glass cascading off the shell of the ship. She ignored that and kept close to the structures.

“What are we doing?” Ben asked as he noticed that each turn brought them closer to colliding with a building. Clarissa was flying close enough to reach out and touch them.

“Leading this thing into shallow waters,” Clarissa said. “It only has eyes for us.”

“Aren’t we special,” Ada said.

We are, Clarissa thought. The creature was fixed on the *Fallen*, and that was an advantage to press. Right then and there she made up her mind what she was going to do.

Meanwhile, manning the turret on top of the *Fallen*, Wan kept peppering the monster with cannon fire. It was a bit disheartening, Clarissa suspected, seeing his shots simply bounce off or get absorbed by the creature. But anything to distract it was a good thing.

Clarissa made the mistake of glancing at the rear camera, and grimaced. The enormous and surprisingly agile creature opened its mouth, and out of it fired telephone-pole-sized spears made of dark grey Shapeless material.

“They’re trying to skewer us,” Ben said.

The Supramax Hawk dodged masterfully. Most of them missed by a wide margin, slamming instead into the buildings that were all around them. “No kidding,” Clarissa said.

Then the ship shuddered, and she knew that one had hit its mark. She cursed under her breath.

“Cargo bay,” she said. “We’re fine.”

Then they all heard Wan scream, “You’ve got to be shitting me!”

He dropped out of the manhole-sized opening that housed the ladder that led up to the guns. Upon landing, he twisted his ankle and was showered by the broken glass from the pod.

Clarissa grimaced. “Turret pod. We’re fine.”

“We’re not gonna be fine much longer like this,” Ada snapped. “We have to do something.”

Congo sprinted the length of the cockpit to check on Wan when he reentered, limping badly. Wan was laughing.

“What’s so funny?” Congo asked. “Stay still so I can take a look.”

“I just fought a giant alien bird over the most heavily militarized city on Earth, and all I got is a sprained ankle. I dunno, that’s funny to me.”

“You’re delirious. Probably from pain. Here.” Congo shot Wan up with a stim shot. “And you broke it, you didn’t sprain it.”

“Whatever. I’m alive. For now, at least.”

Clarissa took yet another sharp turn, but this one was with purpose. She pulled the *Fallen* up behind a huge building that served as the headquarters

for the UEF International Bank, the home of the UEF's galactic schemers. They were probably as responsible for the war as anyone.

The former AIC spy intended on blowing it to hell. Not out of spite for being from the opposition, but because she could, and she needed to slow down the Shapeless monster. And she did, since it was too big to take the same turn as quickly.

"C'mon, you big ugly bastard. This is the dinner bell. Come and get it," said Clarissa as she waited for the strange undulating wings to turn the corner. As it did, she piloted the ship away from them, towards the other side of the huge building.

Once Clarissa saw the monster through the windows, she gave the order to Ada. "Light 'em up!"

Ada unleashed hell on the Shapeless bastard. Incendiary rounds cut and burned their way through the walls and windows of the banking building, hitting the creature on the other side, hurting it. She also fired several missiles. One hit something inside the building and blew up relatively harmlessly. Another hit the monster in its face. Even if it had no features she could make out, she could tell when something was really pissed.

The creature flew through the structure, straight at them. But Clarissa was not only prepared for that, she was counting on it.

She quickly turned the *Fallen* around and started to fly in the opposite direction. The Shapeless eagle monster's razor-sharp wings cut through the supports of the huge building as it went. Fourteen floors of steel and concrete fell on top of it.

"Holy shit," Wan said. "I think you got it!"

Clarissa knew better. She spun the *Fallen* around just above the roof of a nearby building. As she did so, the collapsed banking building exploded, sending chunks of rock and debris everywhere. Clarissa could already see the Shapeless creature ripping and clawing its way out. All she'd done was hurt it, and maybe not even that badly.

"Rear stabilizer just took a hit from that debris!" she shouted as warning bells sounded and her board flashed an ominous red.

The *Fallen* slammed down hard on the rooftop.

"Can we get her back up?" Ben asked.

Clarissa shook her head. "Not in time. We're sitting ducks here."

All eyes turned to the Shapeless creature. It had already started to reform itself, shaking off the crumbling remains of the sturdy building like

it had been made of toothpicks.

The head swiveled around, and the big toothy mouth opened for another bloodcurdling scream in their direction.

“We gotta move!” Wan said. He started limping for the rear hatch.

“For once, I agree with the asshole,” Clarissa said. She looked at Ben. “It’s time to abandon ship.”

Ben cursed and jumped up. They all started storming toward the rear hatch. Ben and Ada were shouting ideas back and forth to each other as they went, going through what few weapons they had and trying to figure out where they would go.

“First step is to get off this damn rooftop!” Ada shouted. She and Ben leaped off the ramp at the same time. Wan and Congo were already halfway to what looked like an access hatch that led into the building.

Clarissa stopped at the top of the ramp. She hit the retract button and watched as the landing ramp raised up.

Ben heard the small motor humming, and stopped and turned around. “Clarissa?” he asked, his face contorted in confusion. “What are you—”

“I’m sorry, Ben,” she said. “I’m sorry I got you into all this. You didn’t deserve this.”

Ben furrowed his brow. “None of us do. What are you talking about?”

She smiled as the ramp neared full retraction. “Goodbye, Ben. It’s been fun.”

CLARISSA LEAPED BACK into the pilot’s seat and flipped off the alarm she’d tripped manually and restarted the thrusters. The stabilizers came online instantly.

She glanced out of the cockpit and saw Ben banging on the side of the loading ramp. She slowly spooled up the thrusters, trying not to burn the idiot to a crisp.

Then Ada was beside him, dragging him back and away from the thruster blast as Clarissa took the *Fallen* back up and spun around to face the Oblivion monster.

“Now,” she said. “Let’s end this.”

She yanked back on the sticks and roared backwards. The creature instantly gave chase.

“This is foolish, you know,” Blake said. He sat in the captain’s chair.

“For a ghost, you sure think you know everything,” she said.

“Kinda like somebody we know?” he said playfully.

Kenna, Clarissa’s youngest daughter, peeked around the side of the chair, holding one of Blake’s fingers. “Is it a monster, mommy?” she asked.

“It is, baby,” she said.

“Are you going to stop the monster, mommy?”

“I am,” she said. She looked up at Blake. “I promise.”

“I think it’s time, babe,” Blake said. “We’re well outside the city.”

Clarissa sat back. He was right. She’d been trying to lead the monster as far away as she could for this. She sighed. “I agree.”

She abruptly flipped the Supramax Hawk around and fired her thrusters straight back at the monster. It roared up from the Annapolis skyline and straight at her.

So long, asshole, she thought as she spun up the fold jump engines.

They sputtered and sparked, having been gravely injured by their earlier fold skip. That was okay. She had no intention of going anywhere in particular.

“He’s coming in too fast,” Blake said. “You need to slow him down.”

He was right. The fold jump engines needed time to prepare for a jump.

Clarissa armed every last weapon the *Fallen* had on board. She fired all of them at once.

The Shapeless monster, sun reflecting off its metallic skin, shrieked as it ascended towards Clarissa and the *Fallen*. It rushed straight through the cannon fire; the glowing bright-orange super-heated rounds bounced off, ricocheting into the Annapolis skies. Then the missiles hit.

She’d fired them all, augmented or not, and they created a giant fireball in front of the creature. It flew through it, blinded for a moment, then shrieking as it opened its mouth wide to swallow the *Fallen*.

“Fold engines are ready, mommy,” said Kenna.

“I know, sweetheart,” Clarissa said. She kissed Kenna’s forehead, then squeezed Blake’s hand.

Then she initiated the fold.

The Shapeless creature smashed into the *Fallen*, and metal teeth puncturing the roof of the cockpit was the last thing Clarissa saw before the

world stretched out toward infinity and disappeared as she and the creature were ripped right out of the sky.

BEN WAS STILL STANDING at the top of the rooftop access point, staring up at the spot where he'd seen Clarissa disappear over the horizon with the monster in pursuit.

He saw the unmistakable flash of a fold engine in operation. There was nothing quite like in the universe. "My God."

Ada gasped next to him. "Did she...?"

"Just fold jumped with the damn thing."

"To where?"

Ben shook his head. "I doubt even she knows. Or cares."

"What do we do now?" Wan asked. He'd come back up to the top of the stairs.

"I don't know. We need a ship."

"Are you looking at the same thing I am?" Wan asked.

Ben followed his gaze upward to the battle happening in the skies above as Commodore Grant and his motley fleet struggled mightily to fight the Shapeless flagships and the thousands of fighters still left behind. "This isn't a battle that we're going to win."

"That doesn't mean we shouldn't fight anyway," said Ada.

"It means we shouldn't fight right now," Wan said. "Let's go regroup, figure something out."

"Run?" Ben asked.

"If you want to call it that."

Ben couldn't accept that. He couldn't accept retreat; after all, so many people had given up to try and stop the coming Armageddon. He couldn't just hide away and fight after all the dying was done. His mind raced, looking for any possible option, but everything came up blank.

That was when he realized they'd been noticed.

A Shapeless fighter screamed straight towards Ben and the others on the rooftop. It was moving with purpose, too fast to dodge.

They all bundled into the stairwell. Ben was the last one in. The Shapeless fighter smashed into the rooftop and the blast tore through the

hatch above the staircase, sending sparks and debris raining down over them.

“We need to get down to ground level,” Ada said. “They won’t be able to follow us down there as easily.”

Ben and the others hurried down a dozen levels before their staircase ended and they found themselves running through the halls of an apartment tower, searching for a staircase that led down the rest of the way. But the going was tough. Residents’ belongings were strewn about the hallways, no doubt the refuse left after a hasty evacuation. Congo and the limping Wan led the way, a scavenger instinct taking over as he pushed further and further ahead.

Ben watched the gap grow between the two groups. He was about to call out to them to slow down when he heard a strange noise. The hall around him shook. In a split second he made the decision to grab Ada and pull her back towards him.

As they spun around to go the other way, the wall right behind them exploded. He whirled, and they fell in a heap as debris fell all around them. It took him a moment to grasp what he was looking at when he came back to his senses.

A Shapeless fighter had crashed straight through the building. Another few steps, and both of them would’ve been smears on the apartment tower’s hallway rug.

“They’re smashing into the building,” Ada said, still sounding a little dazed.

“Move!” Ben yelled as he got to his feet and helped her up. They were both still unsteady on their feet as they scrambled down the hallway.

Moments later, there was another huge rumble of impact as another fighter smashed into the side of the building.

“Down here! We found the stairs!” yelled Congo from the far end of the hallway.

Ben and Ada ran as fast as they could. The building shook from another impact as they reached the stairwell. Ben swung inside the doors so quickly he ran right into Wan and knocked him flat.

As he pushed himself up off the concrete stairwell landing, he realized what Wan was looking at. He felt a warm breeze in his face. A giant chunk of the stairwell was missing, opened up to the city floor below.

“Guess the stairs aren’t an option,” Ada said.

“You think?” Wan snipped.

Jumping down to where the stairs continued, past the gigantic hole in the building and stairwell, would’ve been too hard. They either had to go up and find another way, or become sitting ducks for the Shapeless fighters or cultists to finish off.

Ben looked out the hole in the building and stairwell. In the distance he watched the air battle as it raged on. All he hoped and prayed for was that his dad would finish the job before the Shapeless flagships activated their planet killers.

Then Ben saw movement in his peripheral vision. He pulled back a moment before his view was blocked by three Shapeless fighter ships who hovered up and faced off with the group.

Ben knew he should be scared, but he only felt anger replace his exhaustion. “Come on! What are you waiting for? We’re right here!” he yelled.

Ada stood next to Ben, just as defiant, a snarl on her face.

Wan kicked out with his bad leg, cursing and taunting the aliens with phrases Ben had never even heard before. Congo was the only one that looked genuinely, appropriately scared.

And then suddenly, like someone had just flipped a switch, the engines on all three Shapeless fighters flared out and died.

The ships fell out of the sky, dropping like rocks.

Ben leaned over the lip and stared down in confusion as the three fighters all smashed into the ground, sending a wave of heat roaring back up the side of the building. *What the hell?*

After a long moment of shocked silence, Wan said what they all were thinking. “Why aren’t we dead right now?”

“Look!” Ada shouted as she pointed up in the sky.

The liquid-metal surfaces of the enormous Shapeless flagships had turned to black obsidian—lava rock. Then, seconds later, after every last drop hardened, they started to fall.

Ben, holding on to the stairwell’s inside wall, stuck his head outside the huge hole. He saw thousands of Shapeless fighters, all falling like alien metal rain.

Ada grabbed Ben’s hand. Wan leaned against Congo, who promptly shrugged him off.

The group stayed there in the hallway, looking out the hole at the silent scene unfolding before them.

The sky was suddenly filled with falling debris streaking downward.

Defeated, inactive, dead, the Shapeless flagships plummeted towards Annapolis. It was one last final insult, a final jab from the Shapeless. For when they hit the city they created a mini-tremor, kicked up a huge wave of dust, broken glass, and debris that rushed down the alleys, through the broken buildings, and draped all over the metropolis.

Once the dust settled, Ben, Ada, Congo, and Wan kept standing there, staring at the wreckage that was once the capital of military strength in the UEF.

None of them said anything for some time. When they finally did, Ben remained silent.

To him the victory brought with it a grim reality. He knew that his father was never going to be coming back from his mission to the Shapeless' planet. He *felt* it. Seeing the fruits of his father's sacrifice made it hit him even harder.

"You okay?" Ada asked.

"I'll be fine."

She nodded. Then she glanced out at the empty sky and then back at Ben. "Your dad?"

"Yeah."

"He could still be alive," Ada said. "You don't know for sure that he's gone."

"I do. I can't explain why, but I know."

Ada rested her head on Ben's shoulder. The two of them looked out at the city turned battlefield.

"How the hell are we still alive?" Ben whispered. "When so many are dead?"

Ada shook her head but said nothing. What was there to say? There was never a good answer to a question like that.

EPILOGUE

HUNTING RATS

TWO WEEKS HAD PASSED since the war against the Shapeless had ended, but the war against the Oblivion cultists continued. They were still out there, hiding wherever they could to try and weather the storm of extreme and deserved persecution.

Ducar was one of these cultists in hiding. The head of their elite band of murderers, he'd made a run for it as soon as the Shapeless ships started falling out of the sky. There was no doubt in his mind that his position in the terrorist group would garner the death penalty. If it was anything like the rest of the universe, he'd just be shot on sight.

Having lost count of the days since he went into hiding, Ducar woke up, groggy, in the basement of a ground-level apartment in Annapolis. He didn't have the time to escape the city after the fall of his saviors. It'd been too dangerous to move since then, as the city sentinels and UEF military set up checkpoints at every port of entry and exit.

At the checkpoints, city sentinel members and soldiers searched for a couple of tell-tale signs of cultists. One was their shaved heads, though that became a less dependable attribute, since some had simply grown their hair out even before the attack, in order to blend in with the public and make it easier to take them unawares. Another was a small tattoo on the back of the upper neck, right below the head and hairline. It was a tattoo of a black moon, one of the symbols of the cult. Lastly, they checked HUD IDs. Though the UEF was still struggling to recover from the attacks on Earth and the loss of its moon, the digital infrastructure was still intact.

Ducar would fail all the tests trying to detect Oblivion cultists at the various checkpoints throughout and around Annapolis. So he had to stay

deep underground, away from the prying eyes of anyone the authorities would believe and trust. The ground level of the super city was perfect.

Sticking to a strict routine, Ducar stayed indoors all day. Though the days were considerably shorter with the loss of the moon's gravitational influence, and the weather was already growing more extreme while UEF scientists tried desperately to understand what could be done, it was still difficult to stay out of sight, especially for someone who had previously been afforded such physical and moral freedom. The nights were the only time he could venture out.

The loss of Earth's moon had many negative effects on the planet. For one, the previously mentioned shorter days. Tides came in shallower, further from shore. There was open debate about whether seasons would cease to exist, and what effect that might have on the planetary ecology that remained on the planet. With no moon in the sky at night, Earth's nights were darker than ever, a problem that every city sentinel in every super city had a hard time dealing with. There was a sharp uptick in crimes such as break-ins or thefts. Anyone would've been nervous taking a walk in any super city's lower levels at night before the war with the Shapeless. But now it was truly dangerous, as all humanity's monsters chose to dwell in this new darkness.

Ducar was one of those monsters that dwelt in the darkness. But on the dawn of this evening, he was a sleepy man who didn't look forward to another night scavenging for whatever he and his fellow cultists could find or take. He looked at himself in the mirror in the basement apartment he and his comrades occupied. He was a far cry from the police officer he'd started as back on Vassar-1; that seemed like lifetimes ago. His face was filthy, and his beard had started to grow back in. His hair was growing, but at nowhere near the pace he needed it to.

Someone knocked on the bathroom door. Ducar ignored it at first. He went about washing his face and brushing his teeth, ignoring the stench of death that hung thick in the bathroom. That stench came from the tub, where the bodies of an elderly couple, the original owners of this sad apartment, still lay decomposing.

The knocking continued, this time much harder. "Ducar! We need to get out of here! Now!" It was the voice of Gar, one of the surviving cultists, a former zealot like Ducar himself. They'd escaped to this apartment alongside two other cultists, Yason and Onica.

Ducar sighed and planted his hands on the sink in front of him. This night was going to be the night they were going to get HUDs implanted by an unscrupulous forger, also on the city's ground floor. Then they were finally going to escape, hide in the wilds for a few months, and then start their new lives. But it looked like that was too good to be true.

"Ducar! They're only a minute away! We need to go!" Gar was obviously panicked.

Unlike Gar, Ducar had known this day was coming. Yes, they'd managed to put it off a little longer than the majority of the Oblivion cultists. There was no doubt in his mind, though, that one day, someone would find them and look to enact vengeance.

"I hear you, Gar," Ducar said calmly. "Tell the others to take up positions and open the door to the tunnel."

Ducar took out a small coin-sized holodisk. He pressed the button on the side, turning it on. Out of the top a holographic image of his lost love, Vesta, appeared. She was so young and innocent. They'd captured that hologram the day before they'd officially become cultists.

"Soon I'll join you in the Abyss. Just hang on, wait for me. Let's see if we can send some of these bastards to you first." Ducar turned off the holodisk. He put it in his pocket. Then he picked up the rifle that rested against the wall near the sink.

"Do we fight or do we run?" asked Onica. She was ready to do either, with a flak gun in her shaking hands. Was it fear? Certainly, but adrenaline too. He had no doubt she would act if called upon.

"They're thirty seconds out," said Gar. He was the only one of them with a HUD. Through it, he could see and track UEF and city sentinel communications. "There's a team on their way directly to this apartment, with orders to arrest or kill."

"We fight," Ducar said simply. The vow to get revenge for his Vesta would have to come now. He released the safety on his crude rifle.

They all stared at the front doors of the small, outdated, filthy apartment, expecting it to be blown open and to have soldiers come charging through, firing. But nothing happened. It was silent.

"Where are they?" asked Ducar, his rifle partly raised and aimed at the apartment's front door.

"I don't understand. They're just hovering over us, not moving," answered a confused Gar.

“How about the people in the ships? Has anyone gotten out?”

“Not as far as I can tell.”

Ducar thought about what was happening for a moment. Then he started to slowly back away. He could feel it: they were still coming, just not via the entrance they thought.

“Okay. We can’t stick around here. Let’s take the tunnels out—”

Before Ducar could finish his sentence, super-heated bullets cut through the ceiling of the apartment.

Three hit Gar: one in the chest, one in the stomach, and another in his head, killing him immediately. Yason took a bullet in his shoulder. Onica and Ducar managed to scurry away unscathed.

“Yason!” yelled Onica as Ducar dragged her away towards the back of the apartments and the tunnel they’d dug there.

“Go!” Yason screamed. “I’ll see you in the Abyss.”

Bleeding and hurt, he dragged himself to a nearby chair. He turned it towards the apartment door, then plopped himself down in it. Rifle resting on his lap, he waited.

Yason watched as sparks flew out from the inside of the apartment’s front door. Someone on the other side was using a laser cutter to carve an opening. As he faded in and out of consciousness, the cultist smiled, knowing that no matter what happened next, he would get what the Saviors had promised him and all the other Oblivion cultists: peace and happiness in the grave.

“We can’t just leave him!” yelled Onica as Ducar dragged her towards the kitchen at the back of the apartment.

“We can and we will.” Ducar, having gotten the idea from a hunt back on Vassar-1, pulled the refrigerator away from the wall, revealing the small tunnel the cultists had dug over the course of the previous two weeks.

“But he’ll be killed!”

“Yes, he will.” Ducar went over to Onica and held her by both sides of her face to make sure she was paying attention. He looked her straight in her big brown eyes. “We’ll see him again. You know that. For now, we need to survive to spread the truth. That’s our duty. Understand?”

Onica started to cry, but she nodded her head. Ducar was right. Of course he was. Human emotion and connection were hard things to shake off.

Ducar entered the tunnel first. It was primitive and rough. Rocks and other debris cut and scraped his palms and knees as he crawled through the tight dark space. He turned on the flashlight on his rifle to help him navigate.

Onica started to cry again when she heard gunshots from the apartment behind them. She knew what that meant. Her love was now in the Abyss. It didn't slow her down, though. As much as she wanted to join Yason, Ducar was right. They had a job and a responsibility to carry on.

Ducar reached the end of the tunnel. Above him was a piece of sheet metal they'd put there, anchored down by a couple of pieces of rubble, which could still be found all over the city floor from the Shapeless' attack. He pushed up.

Though it was heavy, Ducar managed to push the rubble-weighted sheet-metal panel off, and he stuck his head out into the open. Above him, he could see the lights that led all the way up to the night sky. He also saw two ships, city sentinel cruisers, hovering above where the apartment was. Their search lights scanned the area.

First he turned off his rifle-mounted flashlight. Then Ducar climbed silently out of the tunnel. He reached down and noiselessly helped Onica up and out as well. They knelt as they made sure to stay out of any sources of light. Their destination was still the forger's place to get their new HUDs implanted. Nothing had changed. Their pursuers' arrival simply moved up the timetable for their escape plans.

Ducar's thigh burned from an old wound as he and Onica stayed low. They made their way to one of the countless shady marketplace alleyways in the Annapolis city floor. This particular one was called The Lows. Before entering, Ducar and Onica both wrapped scarves around their necks and heads, stood up straight, and tried to hide their weapons under their jackets.

The Lows was a perfect place for Ducar and Onica to go unnoticed. It was a sanctuary and safe place for the undesirables of the city. As they moved through the crowds of those selling and buying different vices, the two cultists kept their heads down. Though no one in those alleys were likely looking for them, there was a reward on their heads, and these were the kinds of places where rewards like that moved people to action. They still needed to be careful.

If Ducar's beliefs and passion in what the Oblivion cult represented had wavered at all after the wars, they were re-cemented as he and Onica

pushed and squeezed their way through The Lows. He passed beggars, from old to children, asking for any credits the undesirables who frequented those markets could spare. He looked and kept walking as some of those young beggars were accosted and actively being recruited by sex traffickers, pimps and slavers. Prostitutes, some drug addicts, a few pregnant and again, some young, too young to even attend high school, propositioned him, offering a good time in a private room. Drug pushers advertised their wares out in the open, offering an escape for those so beaten down by life that they needed a way out. Ducar watched as gangsters mugged those from the upper levels who'd decided to come down and slum it.

In Ducar's mind, every poor soul in The Lows deserved—no, needed—the salvation that came with the Oblivion. But there was no time to stop and preach to them. Perhaps one day, when the heat dissipated and the scrutiny had blown over, someone like him could return to save these poor souls. But he had no illusions of ever returning, or the cult returning to any kind of prevalence in his lifetime. The damage that had been done was too severe.

“Hey! You!” Ducar heard someone yelling over the crowd. “Stop them! Them in the rags! Cultists!”

Ducar threw off the scarf as he and Onica started running as fast as they could. Luckily they were in a crowd of civilians, so their pursuers couldn't shoot at them, for fear of collateral damage—assuming they were officers. If they were just trying to collect the reward, then all bets were off.

A big man, from one of the local thug crews judging by his tattoos, grabbed Onica by the arm as she tried to rush by. “Where the hell do you think you're going, lovely?”

Onica was trained to fight, but sometimes such a large disparity in size and strength was impossible to physically overcome. Besides, they didn't have time for this. Ducar grabbed Onica by her other arm and swung himself around, raising his rifle as he did so, and shot the big man in his face.

Everyone in The Lows instantly hit the ground like choreographed dancers going through a routine they knew only too well. Ducar realized his mistake, but it was too late now. He and Onica were completely exposed.

The UEF Marines trailing them opened fire.

On the plus side, Ducar thought, Onica was reunited with Yason sooner rather than later.

Ducar felt a sharp burning pain in the back of his bad thigh. That was followed by a much worse pain that came as a result of his right knee exploding from behind. He screamed as he hit the wet concrete.

“Everyone up and out now!” yelled a woman’s voice, with a slight accent that was hard for Ducar to place. “Or you’ll all be arrested!”

Two shots were fired in the air, and the crowds scattered almost as fast as the street vendors, who left their wares and shops behind unattended. All of them were doing illegal business down here, and were thankful to get off with a warning.

As Ducar tried to crawl away, he saw Onica’s lifeless eyes staring at him from the ground. He tried to ignore them, and kept crawling until a boot landed hard on top of his hand.

Ducar gritted his teeth and swallowed down a yelp of pain. He wasn’t giving them the satisfaction.

“Ducar, is it, right?” asked the woman who’d done the yelling. She knelt down in front of him.

“You!” Ducar spat. Even through his pain and agony, he recognized the woman. She’d been one of his targets back on Vassar-1. “You’re that bitch with the Saito boy!”

The woman smiled. “My name is Ada, but you’re not the first one to call me that.” She paused. “I’ve been looking for you for a while now. You’re a slippery little bastard, aren’t you? Or at least, you were.”

“You and your kind will pay for what—”

“I’ve heard the speech already,” Ada said, cutting him off. Then she lowered her voice. “I’m glad you know who I am. Because you’re going to get to know me even better soon enough, when you’re telling me how to find all your other friends scurrying around in the dark.”

Ducar let his face fall into the puddle under it. He didn’t care that it was filthy. It was over for him. “Just kill me already. You got me. Kill me. I murdered hundreds, maybe thousands. Kill me.”

As two more Marines put cuffs on him, she said, “First, you’re going to suffer for every single one of those lives you took. Then I’ll let you beg to be executed.” She stood up as he was dragged to his feet. “And I’ll personally make sure you get your wish.”

EPILOGUE

FOUR MONTHS LATER

BEN SAT in a large fancy room, surrounded by all the most important people in both the UEF and AIC. There were politicians, military officers, and prominent businessmen. One glaring omission was representatives from Waterman-Lau, what was once the biggest, richest, most powerful company in the universe. All of its assets had been divided up among the colonies and planets that they were located on, their tech and money seized and split by the two governments. It was technology that was desperately needed now. The Earth was unstable without its moon. The terraforming technology that had been perfected on other worlds was being used back on Earth to stabilize the ecology, but it was looking more and more like the population of the Earth needed to look to the stars. In that sense, it was good that the UEF and the AIC had put their differences aside.

With all that work to be done, it seemed obscene to be here for this.

I'm not sure I belong here.

Ben stared into his glass of champagne. He wasn't a big drinker anymore, but he took a polite sip.

"Yes, you do."

Ben glanced next to him and saw his mother, Beverly. She was all dressed up as if she was actually there, not just a memory made into a manner of ghost. The Shapeless ghosts were visiting him more and more now. He wondered if this legacy of theirs would ever go away. Now he knew how Clarissa must have felt, and his father.

"No, I really don't," Ben responded out loud.

"Don't what?" Ben didn't realize that Congo had walked up behind him. She sat down next to him on the couch he was sitting on.

“Belong here. Not at all.”

“Yeah, well, the feeling’s mutual. All these stuffy men and women in their suits and dress uniforms, it’s a bit uncomfortable. Especially for me.” Congo was in a stunning dress, the kind that made gentlemen from across the room take notice. She took a sip of her champagne.

“Speaking of pirates, where’s the ol’ captain?” asked Ben. “Haven’t seen him since the fighting ended.”

“Oh, you know, smuggling a little bit of this, stealing a bit of that. Once a pirate...”

Ben smiled and nodded. “Always a pirate. But not you. Look at you. You actually look like a well-respected member of society.”

Congo laughed. “Don’t get too used to it. Soon as I’m done watching your speech, I’m on the first flight back home. Gonna take some of this money the UEF so generously provided, and start my own clinic. Leave all this fighting and politician shit behind.”

“That sounds...amazing. I’m a little jealous.”

“Says the great protector of the United Earth Federation,” Congo chided him.

“You know that shit means nothing.”

“Nothing?” She shrugged. “It’s the truth by me. You and Ada and Clarissa.” At the mention of Clarissa’s name, her face soured, but she quickly recovered. “And your father. You all helped save all of us. No one is ever going to forget that, least of all myself.” Congo stood up and toasted him, then adjusted her dress and turned to go.

“Where are you off to?”

“I’m not staying here with these people. Come visit me at the clinic sometime. You’ll love it.”

“I will, I promise.”

“You better.”

Ben watched her leave, realizing it was probably the most he’d spoken with her as long as he’d known her. He promised himself he would go visit her.

Friends did that sort of thing, and there were lots of friends he wanted to see tonight. Some more than others.

Where the hell is she?

Ben looked around for Ada. He didn’t see her, and there was no doubt he’d easily be able to pick her out. She was tall, blonde, and a stunning

beauty.

He got up. He'd been sitting on the couch too long. Besides, he still had weeks' worth of untreated injuries aching and plaguing his body, and walking around kept him from getting stiff.

Ben, with his nifty, shiny new arm, gently put his empty champagne glass on one of the drone waiters that flew around the room. Across said room, he saw a couple of familiar faces.

Giving everyone on the way to the other side of the room the necessary pleasantries and "thank you's," Ben finally made it to those two familiar faces, and they were ones he'd never forget. Ace spun a pistol around on his finger like a cowboy. God knows what he was up to in the afterlife. Probably nothing good. Next to him was Clarissa, playing with her daughters.

"Why'd you drag us here, Cap?" Ace said. "I was having a good ol' time in heaven, or is it hell? I dunno which it is or either, it's just damn fun. All the guns and things that go boom I could possibly want. It's a scream, brother."

"I didn't drag anyone here," Ben murmured, trying not to look like a crazy man talking to himself. "I don't know how to do that."

"It isn't him," said Clarissa.

Tomas appeared out of nowhere. "It is him."

Maybe he was right. Maybe Ben was—

"Mr. Saito!" A surprisingly enthusiastic Captain Thorne approached Ben with his hand out to shake, which Ben did.

"Captain. Congrats on your promotion. I'm surprised to see you here. I thought you'd be halfway back to Vassar-1 by now, helping with the reconstruction."

"Oh, I'm heading back home soon as all this pomp and circumstance is over with, but I wasn't going to leave before honoring you and your father. Plus our Senate wanted a high-ranking officer in attendance, and I'm about as high up as it gets these days."

"I'm jealous. I wouldn't be here if I could get away with it."

"Mr. Saito, you see all these people with medals, stars, and bars? Some of them have achieved some great things in their careers. Myself, I got a couple of these for saving lives or winning battles. But all my accomplishments and those of every fake stuck-up politician in this room pale in comparison to you, your crew, and your father's. You saved

humankind. So I think if you want to leave this stuck-up shitshow, you can damn well leave.”

Ben couldn't help but smile at the ornery old captain. “Maybe. And thank you.”

“For what?” Thorne took a sip of his beer. No champagne for him, Ben noted.

“For fighting with us. For helping.”

“No thanks necessary, son. If you want to thank someone, thank our late Captain Rhule. Far as I'm concerned, he deserves a statue right next to your father's. Hell, I'm gonna use my own money to get one built on Vassar-1, along with a monument to all of those lost in my home. No, it's me who should thank you. I heard about what you and your people did in our capital. You saved a hell of a lot lives there as well, including my son's.” Thorne seemed like the kind to try not to show much emotion, but he was on the verge of tears.

“Your son was on-planet? I'm sorry to hear that, it wasn't...well, it was rough there.”

“According to him, he was going to be brought to a processing center, whatever that is. And you and your crew blew it up. After that he escaped. From what I've been told, once someone went into one of those things, they didn't come out. Because of you, my home is free and my son is still breathing. So if you ever get sick of being the protector of whatever, you have a home with us on Vassar-1, on my estate. And I mean that, it's not just an empty offer.”

Thorne's words made Ben feel genuinely good. When everything was happening, he didn't think about the fact that he and the others *did* save lives. Hearing it from someone out loud, especially someone like Thorne, it really did touch his heart. Ben hugged the big man, much to the old lug's discomfort.

“All right, all right,” Thorne said. “Now if you'll excuse me, I need to save my wife from some senators, and it looks like someone's here to save you from me. Good luck, son.”

Ben turned around to find Ada with a champagne in hand. “Yeah, 'son,’” she said playfully. “Good luck.”

She kissed him, and Ben hung on to Ada's hips. “Champagne and no uniform. Who are you?”

Ada smiled, her beautiful vibrant blue eyes locked on to Ben's. "Don't be a smartass."

"But it's my best quality."

"Mr. Saito!" Ben heard the last voice he wanted to hear.

He lowered his head. "Oh, Jesus."

Director Engano made a direct line for Ben.

"Looks like it's time," Ada murmured.

"I really wish you and Congo and, hell, even Wan were up there with me. I don't like being the one to take all the credit."

"You're the name," she said. "And let's face it. Your father is the real hero here. Without him..." She shrugged.

Ben nodded. It was true, and he owed it to his father to honor him the best way he could.

"You're going to do great, babe. I know it."

Engano gave Ada only the briefest acknowledgment, then looked at Ben. "Speech time." She grabbed him by the arm and steered him toward the dais. "Just make sure to emphasize your dad's heroics and how these tragic events have put an end to the Universal War, and..." As the AIC Intelligence Director rambled on, her arm around Ben's shoulder leading him away, he turned back to Ada and mouthed the words: "Help me."

BEN SAT at the base of the statue that had been built in honor of his father, Captain Lee Saito. He nursed one of the AIC beers that Thorne had gifted him. Ada sat alongside him with a beer of her own. They looked out over the gigantic Hero's Square, built where one of the Shapeless flagships had fallen just months ago.

"So what now?"

Ben reached into his pocket. He took out the Polaroid of him and his parents on the boardwalk when he was a kid. Despite being reminded of the other, more negative things that had happened that day, he chose to remember the good parts.

"Where'd you get that?" asked Ada.

"I have no idea. I lost mine years ago. This one came in the mail yesterday."

Ada frowned. "You don't think—"

"I don't want to think about it. If he's alive, then he deserves whatever peace he wants. If he's dead, well, he found the peace he wanted since mom died. So either way, I don't want to know."

They sat together like that, hand-in-hand, saying nothing for several minutes. Ben felt the cool breeze on his face. Earth's unpredictable weather was becoming a problem. Everything about the moonless planet was becoming a problem. The future was as much in doubt as ever.

Finally, Ben sighed and took a swig of his beer. "Was it all worth it?"

Ada cocked her head and looked out into the darkness, letting the gusty winds blow through her long hair. "In the end, it was." She put her arm around him. "We did what had to be done."

Ben nodded. He didn't see any of the ghosts out here. None of the Shapeless dreams of fallen friends and family. It was just him and Ada. "And in the end, that's all you can do."

He hopped down off the base of the statue, helped Ada do the same, and then together they took one last look up at the statue of Captain Lee Saito.

Then they walked off together, still hand-in-hand.

BONUS STORY

This short story is a new addition to the *Oblivion* cannon. It was originally written for an SF anthology but we're including it here. Hope you enjoy it!

Note: While this isn't a prequel necessarily, the events of this story definitely take place prior to Book 1.

MADELINE

GRACE SILVA GLANCED at her dead co-pilot, slumped over with entrails dangling out of his eviscerated chest, and knew she was in trouble.

Her MT-322 *Madeline* mining transport was closing in on Reach Station, one of the furthest stations in AIC space. When she arrived with a gutted co-pilot, three dead people in the cargo bay, and her best friend tied up in the cockpit behind her, there might be a few questions to be answered.

How the hell are you going to explain this?

Normally, Grace would've switched *Madeline* to autopilot at this point, but not this time. She took the sticks and flew manual. Anything to get her mind off the nightmare around her. Maybe the focus would help her think.

As she followed the holographic trail laid out ahead of her, Grace heard the sound of the chair under her dead co-pilot, Dash, as it swiveled toward her. It was her imagination. It had to be.

"Grace?"

She refused to acknowledge Dash. *That's not him. That's not real. Ignore it. It'll go away.*

"Grace, you can't ignore this." She could hear his guts dragging on the floor as he swiveled back and forth.

"Watch me," she said curtly, without turning.

Am I asleep? Is this a nightmare? She'd asked herself the same question a hundred times. The answer was always the same, but she kept asking it anyway. *What else could it be?*

Grace had a hard time remembering when she'd last gotten any sleep. She hadn't gotten a wink since they'd found that damned rock among their cargo. The rock wouldn't let her.

“What are you going to do?” asked Dash.

“I don’t know, okay? I’m going to figure something out,” Grace snapped.

“This doesn’t look good,” Dash said.

“Yes, thank you, I’m aware.”

“So what are you going to do?”

“I’m going back home.”

Dash laughed, but it was a labored, pained laugh. In many ways it sounded a bit disturbing all in itself.

“What’s so funny?”

“You don’t really think there’s any going home right now, do you?”

Grace could just barely see Dash’s reflection in *Madeline’s* front viewing window. She half expected him to be talking, but his lifeless body hadn’t budged.

“Where else would I go?”

“Anywhere but Reach Station, full of Grace. You go there and the Frontier Police will fire you out an airlock before you can even begin to defend yourself. You know that.”

It was true. Grace, like many residents and workers at Reach Station, saw the public executions meted out by the Frontier Police. Most were military burnouts, or even former raiders and pirates, used by the colonial government to keep their far-flung properties operational and profitable.

“I know that. But once they see the rock...”

“Once they see the rock, what? They’ll just overlook the dead crew in the cargo hold, the hog-tied woman behind you and whatever the hell’s left of me? Yup, that’s what will happen. They’ll come to the obvious conclusion that it’s the rock’s fault.”

“Shut up.”

“How can I shut up if I’m not even talking? This is all in your head, Grace.”

Grace managed to force herself to look over at the mangled remains of Dash slumped over in his co-pilot’s seat. The color had left his skin, along with almost all of his blood and his intestines.

What is wrong with me?

Grace wiped the sweat from her forehead and returned her attention to space. It was all in her head, she told herself. Not that *that* made her feel any better about anything.

As far as Grace was concerned, she only had a few options. The first and least desirable was to scuttle her cargo and expel the bodies from inside *Madeline*. Once they were gone, she'd lock Aliza in the cargo bay and make a run for the nearest UEF station, military or civilian. In exchange for not being arrested or killed, she would give them, the enemy, any information she had on Reach Station and the other AIC mining facilities like it spread throughout the galaxy. They always wanted to know more about the AIC supply lines.

The only problem was that Grace, like many who lived under the umbrella of the AIC, had lost friends and family to the war. In their eyes—and her eyes, too—the UEF was pure evil. She didn't trust them, nor should she. She couldn't bring herself to go that route.

Grace's second option was to simply disappear. The galaxy was a big place. She could simply do the same, as if she was going to defect to the UEF, but instead of going to a military-controlled facility, she could go to a Sanctuary City. They wouldn't ask questions.

The third option was for Grace to go back to Reach Station. Though it was quite possibly a perilous option, one that could lead to her death, that was where her life was. For the past seven years she'd called the mining facility home. Even the prospect of leaving it sounded terrifying.

There was a loud beeping noise inside *Madeline's* cabin. The red flashing light on the instruments in front of Grace was impossible to ignore. She knew what it was. It was an indicator that the ship was being hailed.

"Damn," Grace said under her breath as she saw that the mining ship was flanked on both sides by AIC fighters. She had no idea why they were there or what they wanted.

Surely they couldn't know. Could they?

"They know," said Dash.

"There's no way."

"Maybe one of the cargo monkeys in the back alerted them before being, you know, slaughtered."

"I don't think so."

"Maybe Aliza called them."

"She didn't."

"Maybe I did."

Grace looked over at Dash, who was still completely motionless, head slung low, eyes still wide with the shock of certain death.

“There’s only one way to find out,” Grace said. She pressed a communications button. “This is Grace Silva of mining vessel MT-322. How can I help you?”

“MT-322, please state your destination,” ordered one of the pilots in a curt, but not unfriendly, tone.

Keep it together, Grace.

“Reach Station. We just delivered cargo to Vassar-1,” Grace lied. They never reached the AIC capitol. Their cargo bay was still full of space rock.

“MT-322, transport logs show that you were supposed to arrive at the capitol, dock seventy-two echo, eight hours ago. You never did. State your reason.”

Grace closed her eyes for a moment and dug deep for a lie. How much would these pilots know? Surely nothing in real-time. “Reach Station ordered cargo returned just before we docked. It was the damnedest thing. Don’t know why. I’ve been trying to get an answer, but they just wanted me to come in.”

After an agonizingly long pause, the pilot said, “MT-322, please proceed to turn off your engines and prepare to be boarded.”

Grace sat back and took a deep breath.

“They aren’t buying it,” Dash said.

“No shit,” she snapped back.

“You can’t let them on this ship.”

“I know.”

“They’ll find them, find us, find *me*.”

“I know.”

“You’ll be arrested.”

“I know, I know, I *know*!” Grace whipped her head around to face Dash. “Can you just shut up?”

She recoiled in horror.

Dash was leaning towards her, eyes completely black. A thick, oily substance seeped through his teeth and out of his mouth.

Grace screamed.

“WHAT DO YOU MEAN, we have a problem?” asked Dash. He was talking to one of *Madeline*’s cargo bay workers, Franklin, through a video chat screen.

“I don’t know yet,” answered Franklin. He held a matter scanner in his hands, pointing it at the loads of space rock stored in the cargo bay. “Getting some strange energy readings off our load. Afraid we picked up some unstable rock.”

The ore that *Madeline* mined, known as Iontanium, was valuable, and only found in the far-flung reaches of space. Reach Station existed to get at it. Iontanium was integral in the building of advanced spaceships and weaponry. AIC tech was essentially dependent on the material to function, at least at the capacity so that they could match the overwhelming numbers that the UEF sent their way.

There was one big problem with Iontanium. Once clear of the natural habitat that it formed within, it grew increasingly unstable. At some point, without any intervention, it would explode. More than a few transports had fallen victim to the mercurial metal—and in one famous incident, an entire space station.

There were methods to mitigate this outcome, of course, and the *Madeline* was equipped with plenty of countermeasures. Still, nobody slept soundly when there was Iontanium onboard.

“It’s just Franklin being panicky Franklin,” murmured Aliza, the third person on the *Madeline*’s bridge, loudly enough that Grace was sure that the cargo man would hear. “We’ll be fine.”

“Maybe,” Grace said. It was easy for Aliza to dismiss everything. She naturally believed everything would work out fine. She’d been that way for as long as Grace had known her and, frustratingly for Grace, things always did seem to work out for Aliza. But Grace was captain on this haul, so it was her call.

“I’m not trying to become space dust out here,” Dash said. “At least, not yet.”

“Oh, so you have a date in mind for when that’s okay?” Aliza asked.

“When I’m old like you,” Dash said.

Aliza took a swing at him, but he ducked away. At most, she was five years older than Dash; but he was just a kid, and enjoyed turning the screw on the ever-vain Aliza.

“Can you pipe up the readings?” Grace said loudly enough that the communicator would pick up her voice.

Franklin shook his head. “On this old bird? I’d be better off walking them up to you.”

“Tell you what,” Aliza said as she got up out of her seat. She yawned and stretched her back. Then she took the opportunity to thump Dash on the back of the head.

“Ow! Cap, did you see that? Your crewmember is violently out of control.”

Grace shook her head, saying nothing.

Aliza was already heading to the back of the bridge. “I’ll go take a look. Be nice to get off this bridge.” She glanced at Grace. “I can grab some coffee and grub too, if you’re interested.”

“I’ll come with,” said Grace as she too unbuckled herself from her chair and stood up.

Dash looked put out. “And I guess that means I’m not going anywhere?”

“That’s exactly what it means,” responded Grace with a smile as she joined Aliza at the rear hatch.

“Whatchu want from the mess?” Aliza asked.

“We still got any of those tamales your momma baked?”

“We do, but...” Aliza guarded her tamales with her life, at least under normal circumstances. However, this day, she was apparently feeling a little more generous. “Fine. You can have one.”

“And a coffee?” shouted Dash after them.

“This kid,” Aliza said, shaking her head.

“Gracias!”

“Let’s go see what the hell Franklin is blathering about,” Aliza said as she and Grace climbed out of *Madeline*’s bridge. The design of the mining ship was such that the bridge craned far above the rest of the ship, offering good sightlines during regular mining operations. It also meant getting out of the bridge was a hassle.

There was a long ladder down a narrow tube they had to descend to access the rest of the vessel. Beyond that was a long corridor. Every other part of MT-322 branched out from there. The cargo bay was at the very end.

“How many more of these do we have in us, Liz?” asked Grace as they made their way down *Madeline*’s main corridor.

“Do you mean how many more can we take, or how many more do we have to go?”

“Yes,” Grace said.

She and Aliza had a plan. Together, they’d decided that they’d save enough colonial credits from their work at Reach Station to make a permanent move. They’d not only live on solid ground, on a planet, but on a tropical one with safe warm waters that was far from the Universal War. It was called Jai Prime. Aliza had a vid cube of it next to her bunk.

“Well, let’s see. This load will take care of the payment on our tickets. Then we’ll need a few more to afford that unit near the beach. So I’m guessing like four or five until we can leave.”

“Really? That many?” Grace playfully grabbed Aliza by her arm and leaned down on it. “I thought we were almost done.”

“I mean, we are. Kinda. Just a couple more weeks. Maybe a month. And then we can start planning for fun under three suns.” Aliza stopped in front of the entrance to the mess hall, the kitchen. “I’m gonna throw those tamales in. You want one?”

“I’d like to check this shit out in the cargo bay first,” Grace said.

“We’re right here!” Aliza said. “Let’s just eat. I bet that dumbass is reading it wrong. Why did we take him on again?”

Grace followed Aliza into the kitchen. “We needed a third pair of hands back there.”

“And he’s your brother-in-law.”

“And he’s my brother-in-law. He’s not that bad,” Grace said, knowing how defensive she sounded. Franklin wasn’t terribly bright. That much was true, and she had no idea why her sister had married him. But he was nice enough.

“Not a bad person? Sure. But he *is* a bad cargo monkey.” Aliza took out a thin container with the tamales her mom had made them before leaving. She had the option of throwing them into an instant cooker or into an old wall-mounted oven. She preferred the oven.

“He gets the job done.”

“I guess so. These are gonna take a few. Wanna go see what your bro did wrong?” Aliza had a wide grin.

“Might as well.”

Grace and Aliza headed towards the cargo bay, the only locked portion of *Madeline*’s interior. The former entered in the code to open the thick

secured double doors. The latter yawned.

“Grace!” Franklin must’ve been sitting by the doors, waiting for her to arrive. “Er, I mean, Captain.”

“So what’s going on with the matter scanners?” asked Grace as she and Aliza entered the cargo bay.

“You’re doing it wrong, aren’t you?” Aliza asked.

“No,” Franklin said crossly to her.

“So there’s a malfunction?” Grace asked.

“That’s what I thought at first.” Franklin looked a bit flustered.

Grace was used to that from him. It seemed to be his default. “Let’s all go take a look,” she said.

Franklin led them towards the storage area of the cargo bay. Janet and Mr. Kim, the two other cargo minders, kept their distance and stayed busy with their own work. Grace had a feeling they didn’t want to get involved with Franklin’s incompetence, but their conspiratorial glances seemed to convey something deeper.

But Grace chalked it up to avoiding a potential volatile load situation. Nobody wanted to contribute to a lost payday. Mining transport teams only got paid if they delivered.

“Well, I’ll be damned,” Aliza said as she held the scanner in the direction of the stored rock bins in *Madeline*’s cargo bay. “He’s right.”

The thick, clear containers were filled to the brim in order to maximize profit with each trip. It would be impossible to make out any specific strata of rock within.

“Lemme see,” Grace took the scanner from Aliza. The energy levels were off the charts. It didn’t feel right. If the readings were right, they should’ve already blown up by then. “This can’t be...” She smacked the scanner against her leg. She looked again, but nothing had changed.

“It’s right. I swear,” Franklin said. He was sweating profusely. “I checked and double checked. Mr. Kim even took the damn thing apart, put it back together. Same thing.” He, like everyone else onboard *Madeline*, had no intention of dying out there in the middle of space. He had a wife and a life waiting for him back at Reach Station.

“That right, Mr. Kim?” yelled Aliza. Kim, the oldest member of the crew and not much of a talker, peeked over and nodded his head without coming in closer.

“Damn.” Aliza rubbed her cheek. “Well, there’s only one thing to do.”

“No, we’re not,” Grace said immediately. “It’s too dangerous.”

“Uh-huh, yeah we are.” Aliza went over to a nearby wall and took off a pair of gloves and put them on. She grabbed a second pair and threw them to Grace.

“No, we’re not,” protested Grace as she caught the gloves Aliza tossed to her.

“C’mon, we both know we’re going to do it.” Aliza walked over to the load of space rock and Iontanium that had made the matter scanner spike. Her finger hovered over the release button.

“Do we have to?” Franklin whined.

For once, his nasal voice echoed just what Grace thought. He wasn’t the only one scared of the volatile Iontanium being jostled when the contents of the container spilled out. The containers were lined with iridium-infused nanofiber that worked to dull the effects of the Iontanium.

Not to mention, they’d have to clean up the mess.

“Afraid we do, Frankie,” Aliza said. And with that, she pressed the button.

There were some brief alarm sirens; then one of the thick transparent plastic walls that held the rock and metal slowly slid up and open.

Grace felt her stomach tighten for a split second, waiting for an explosion.

None came. Instead, only rock and stable Iontanium tumbled out onto *Madeline*’s cargo bay floor.

Aliza dove right in. “Don’t see anything,” she said.

“Jesus, Liza, careful!” Though Grace didn’t see any of the glow of unstable Iontanium, it didn’t mean that there wasn’t any in the pile of metal-laden rocks. Some could have just been hidden by the rest.

“What is that?” asked Franklin. He pointed at what looked like some kind of box in the middle of the rocks still in their container. Black and with what looked like carved designs in it, it stood out.

“No idea,” said Grace as she leaned in for a closer look. *How could no one have noticed this before?*

“That’s... interesting.” Aliza was intrigued.

“It’s damn weird, is what it is,” Grace said as she got closer still. She wiped away the debris on the box. Against her better judgment, she pulled it out from the rock and carried it over to a curious Aliza and scared Franklin.

“Gimme, gimme, gimme.” Wound up, Aliza ushered for the box to be brought to her.

“Why are you so excited? We don’t even know what it is,” Grace said.

“I’m excited because we never run into something we don’t know. We wake up and either come to this bridge or to Reach’s hangar. Get loaded up. Fly to the capital. We unload, come back, rinse and repeat. There’s never anything new, never anything exciting. But not today. Today there’s something new. Today, excitement!” Aliza practically snatched the box from Grace’s hands. She did that a lot, even though her friend had told her how much it annoyed her.

“You sure you guys want to be handling that?” Franklin asked. “I mean, that was inside the asteroid.”

“Somebody probably put it in there,” Aliza said.

“When?” Franklin asked. “When could someone do that? This came in right from the drones.”

Grace glanced around at the other cargo minders. “You guys playing a joke on us?”

They both looked at her like she was speaking in tongues. Both shook their heads.

“It’s probably not, you know, *human*,” Franklin whispered.

“What? Like space aliens?” Grace asked.

Aliza snorted. “One can only hope.” She flipped the box around and examined it for any seal, latch, or opening of any kind.

Grace didn’t know what to think. Despite their expanded explorations into the cosmos, humankind had yet to run into any intelligent life forms—though there was plenty of evidence that some had existed at some point in the ancient past.

And yet, there was that ornate box in Aliza’s hands.

“Shouldn’t we report this?” Franklin asked. “I mean, isn’t that policy? Any unknown objects or elements should be reported to management. Right? That’s what they said during the orientation thingie. Right?”

“How are we going to report it when you don’t even know what it is?” asked Aliza. “I don’t know about you guys, but I’m getting tired of waiting to figure out that answer. Shame, would’ve been a nice little jewelry box or something.”

“Wait,” Grace snapped, reaching out for the box as she suddenly realizing what her unpredictable friend was doing.

But it was too late. With a quick flick of her wrist, Aliza smashed the corner of the box hard against the floor of the cargo hold. It shattered like glass the second it made impact.

Out of it slid a small, obelisk-shaped sliver of porous black rock. In many ways it looked like old-Earth lava rock.

Grace was paralyzed. For a moment, she thought it was shock. But then she heard something calling to her.

It was right inside her head, like her own voice, but it sounded hard and gravelly. The voice called to her, screamed at her with an intensity that made her wince.

It was yelling at her to pick up the shiny black rock. She reached out.

But Aliza beat her to it.

“Hey!” Grace said. She was actually upset.

“What?” Aliza shrugged, flipping the shiny black rock around in her hand.

“Nothing, I just...what do you think it is?”

“We really should report this,” Franklin said again. He was shaking like a leaf now. He’d taken a couple of steps back.

“Why don’t you go play cards with Mr. Kim?” Aliza said sharply. “Or whatever you guys do down here during your free time.”

Franklin frowned and took another step back.

“Aliza?”

While her friend had been talking to Franklin, Grace noticed something odd. It was hard to detect at first. But as she watched, the motion became clearer.

There was something moving in and out of the small holes in the rock. Something liquid.

“What?” Aliza said, still distractedly watching Franklin slink away. “Cool, isn’t it?”

“I think you should probably put that down,” Grace said.

Aliza looked at her and raised one eyebrow. “What are you talking about?”

“There’s something—”

Before Grace could finish, the liquid inside the rock seemed to spring up through the top openings and ooze right onto Aliza’s exposed forearm. Her eyes bulged as it dug under her skin.

“What the hell?” yelled Aliza. She tried to drop the rock, but a strand of the living liquid kept it stuck to her hand.

As she yelled out in pain, Grace watched in horrified shock as the substance moved under her friend’s skin, undulating like flowing water. Then, suddenly, the undulation stopped and Aliza dropped to the floor like she’d been punched. Her head smacked against the ground as her eyes rolled up in her head. The black rock spun across the floor.

Grace felt a sickly tickling sensation on her arm. She looked down to find her own skin was crawling around on her body.

She blinked and tried to slow her breathing. *It didn’t touch you*, she told herself. *It’s not on you. It’s in your head. It only touched Aliza.*

But she couldn’t stop the sensation of crawling under her skin.

Grace screamed, or tried to, but nothing came out of her mouth. A flash of intense pain roared through her body.

Then she passed out.

GRACE WOKE up in the small medical bay on board *Madeline*. Her eyes opened to a dimly lit room. All she heard at first was the constant hum of the engines and beeping machines and monitors. Then she heard Aliza’s voice.

“How you doing?”

Grace turned to see her friend in the bed next to her. The tiny med bay only had two beds.

“How am I doing?” Grace croaked. “How the hell are *you* doing?”

“I’m fine.”

Grace shook her head. “No, you’re not.”

“Really, I am. They scanned me, everything’s normal.” Aliza paused. “How are you?”

“How am *I*?” Grace asked sharply. “I’m freaked out.”

“Do you remember what happened?”

Grace frowned. “Yeah, that black liquid crawled up in your skin and you passed out. And then ... And then I guess I lost it and I passed out, too.” It was embarrassing, but there was no hiding it. “And anyways, I ...” Grace tried to sit up, but found it hard to get up. When she looked down,

she saw her wrists and ankles were bound to the examination bed she lay on. “What is this? Why am I...Aliza, let me out of these things.”

Aliza looked genuinely upset. “Sorry, I can’t do that.”

“Want to tell me why?” Grace asked as she stared at the restraints.

“You don’t remember?”

“C’mon, this isn’t funny. Lemme out.”

“You attacked Franklin. Like, you almost killed the poor kid.”

Grace felt a chill run down her spine. “What are you talking about? ‘Attacked him’?”

“You passed out in the cargo bay. He tried helping you and you freaked out, tackled him, and just kept hitting him. I tried getting you off him and you gave me this beauty for my troubles.”

Grace hadn’t registered Aliza’s black eye until she pointed it out. “I...I don’t remember any of that.”

Nothing about any of this made sense to Grace. She didn’t remember attacking Franklin or hitting Aliza. But when she looked down at her hands, she saw that they were swollen, the skin split on a couple of knuckles.

“I know. Stay here,” Aliza said. “I gotta go put out those fires you caused with the cargo monkeys.”

She got up and walked over to one of the med bay walls and took something out of a drawer. It was a syringe. “This should help you relax, get some sleep.”

“Wait, wait, wait. I don’t want to—”

Aliza stood over her, frowning. “It’s for your own good, Grace.”

GRACE WOKE up on the floor of the transport’s main corridor. As she lifted her face up off the grated floor, she felt the marks it left on her face. She was wet. Why was she wet?

When she rolled over and sat up, she saw that she was covered in blood.

Grace felt revulsion and panic in equal measures. She was in pain all over, like she’d been in a fight. She half-crawled and half-rolled over to the wall of the corridor.

She proceeded to check herself out. There were no cuts, no bullet wounds, not even any abrasions. She was fine. Her pain seemed to be all

internal.

The blood definitely wasn't hers.

What the hell is this? What the fuck is happening?

Grace was beyond scared.

Get hold of yourself. Get up. Figure this thing out.

After a few deep breaths and attempts to find some semblance of calm, she managed to stand up.

It was only then that she realized she was bathed in red light. The emergency lights were on all over the ship.

"Aliza?" she called out as she walked towards the back of *Madeline*. "Aliza!"

There was no answer. Something was very wrong.

On her way back towards the cargo bay, she stopped by the doorway to the medical bay. The restraints on the bed had been cut down at the base of the table.

Someone had cut her loose.

Grace continued on down the corridor. She encountered no one. She entered in the code to open the double doors to the cargo bay. A sinking feeling of dread washed over her as she waited. She knew, absolutely knew, that nothing good was waiting beyond those doors.

Before the doors were even fully open, she was assaulted by the gruesome sight of one of the cargo workers slumped against one of the containers. It was Janet. Her head was barely attached to her neck by little bits of tendon and sinew.

Grace immediately vomited. She couldn't help it. In no way was she prepared to see something like that.

"Holy shit," Grace mumbled out loud as she wiped the vomitus from her lips. "Shit, shit, shit." She took one last look at Janet and barely managed not to vomit again.

Grace looked around for anything she could use as a weapon. She found a wrench on the ground, right next to one of Janet's limp lifeless hands. As she picked it up, it wasn't lost on her that her crewmate had probably thought it would be adequate protection, too.

Grace continued forward, further into the cargo bay. There was no more calling out anyone's name. Whether or not anyone was still alive, who or whatever had killed them was probably still lurking around. And she wasn't ready to die yet.

In front of her, face-down on the floor, lay the oldest member of *Madeline's* crew. "Mr. Kim?" Grace quietly said, not really expecting an answer.

She used the tip of her toe to nudge Mr. Kim, just to see if he would respond. Nothing. She used the same foot to flip him over.

When Grace saw what was done to Mr. Kim, she vomited again. It looked as if he had kissed a shredder. His face was ground up beyond recognition.

Grace leaned up against a wall, trying to compose herself.

That's when she heard it.

It sounded like someone gasping for breath.

She slowly approached the sound, realizing as she did so that she had ended up right back at the container they'd opened earlier. The one with the shiny black rock. The contents of the container were still spilt out on the cargo bay floor.

Franklin lay on top of the rocks, holding his bleeding chest, gasping for air.

Grace rushed over to him.

His eyes were wide with fear. He was trying to say something, but his mouth was muddied by blood, and just the act of drawing breath seemed to take all his effort.

"Shhh, don't talk," Grace said as she looked Franklin over. He'd suffered a stab wound to his chest. All the blood pooling around him in the rocks, coupled with his refusal to move his hands, told her it was bad. She carefully slid a couple of his fingers aside and caught a glimpse of the edge of what looked like a big hole gouged out, exposing his ribcage.

She gasped. "Who did this to you?"

Grace highly doubted it was Dash. He wasn't the type under any circumstances, and she'd not seen him once since she'd left the bridge. She assumed he was still up there, and the thought suddenly occurred to her that she needed to get up there too, if only to make sure he was still alive.

Then there was Aliza. She wasn't violent, let alone homicidal. But Grace couldn't ignore the fact that the black liquid from that damn rock had crawled right under her skin.

I saw it happen!

Grace's mind raced with possibilities. What could that liquid have done to her best friend? Was it some kind of alien life that had taken over her

mind? If so, was it forcing her to hurt *Madeline's* crew?

Then there was a third possibility. *Madeline* could have a stowaway. It was possible something aboard was hunting them.

But there weren't that many places to hide on a ship this size.

Franklin was staring up at her. "Do you know who did this to you, Franklin?" Grace paused. "Just nod if yes."

He just stared up at her, terrified.

"Was it Aliza?" she asked.

Blood and spit made small pathetic bubbles in his mouth as he tried to talk, tried to say something. She got closer so that she could hear.

"Get. Away—" His voice gave out.

When she turned back to him, his eyes were glassy. She knew he was dead.

"Franklin? Franklin!" she shouted, as if raising her voice would somehow bring him back to life. It didn't.

She tripped and fell as she backed away. This was too much, way too much for her to take. How had an ordinary run turned into this nightmare? How did it happen so quickly?

What am I supposed to do? What the hell can I do? I need to find Aliza. I need to get some answers.

Grace got up. She wiped tears from her cheeks and hurried out of the cargo bay. Her destination was obvious. She had to go to the bridge.

Normally the walk from the cargo bay and up the ladder to the bridge took a couple of minutes. But this time it felt like hours as Grace tried to steel herself for whatever she would find once she got there.

If Aliza had done this, it wasn't *her*. She was under the control of that damn black goo. The stuff had attacked her. Taken her over. She probably had no idea what she'd done.

There were bloody handprints on the rungs of the ladder that led up to the bridge. Grace readjusted her grip on the wrench before climbing up, using her one free hand. She moved slowly, steady and cautious. She expected an ambush the moment she entered.

Grace poked her head up through the open hatch that led into the bridge. Aliza was inside. She was standing next to Dash at the co-pilot's station. Her back was to Grace.

Suddenly Dash screamed.

The guttural sound seemed to wake something in Grace. She charged into the bridge, swinging the wrench wildly as she did so. “Aliza! Stop!”

Aliza spun around just as Grace slashed downward with the wrench. The weight of it practically pulled her off her feet.

But somehow Grace missed. The wrench clanged off the side of the pilot’s chair.

She pulled it back, eyes wide with surprise when she found that Aliza had disappeared.

Instead there was only Dash, sitting there in the co-pilot’s chair, doing his damndest to hold his guts in with his hands.

Grace’s hand felt light. The wrench was gone.

Instead there was just the hand that had been holding it, dripping with blood, pieces of what looked like skin stuck under her nails. Somehow, Grace sensed that there was someone behind her.

She spun around to see a crying Aliza rushing at her with the bridge’s emergency axe held high over her head.

Grace didn’t know what to do. The shock of seeing anyone coming after her with an axe, combined with that someone being her best friend, rendered her helpless—or so she thought.

Without thinking, Grace grabbed the handle of the axe mid-swing. She stared at her friend in the eyes for a second, seeing genuine hurt. It wasn’t the homicidal look she expected to see. Easily overpowering the smaller Aliza, Grace yanked the handle of the axe forward, smashing it into Aliza’s face.

Aliza staggered backward, then fell in a heap, dazed and nearly unconscious from the blow.

“Why’d you make me do that?” screamed Grace. “Why’d you do this?”

Aliza looked up at her, then slumped over, a nasty gash on her forehead where Grace realized the handle had hit her much harder than she’d thought. She was surprised by her own strength in that moment—powered, no doubt, by her own adrenaline.

Grace tried to wrap her head around what had just happened. She spun around to Dash, but his chest—what was left of it—wasn’t rising and falling anymore. He was dead.

It was just her and Aliza now.

Grace found the rope in the same emergency bin as the axe, and tied her best friend up. Then she dragged her out of the bridge.

“SO WHAT ARE you going to do?” asked Dash.

Grace had stopped screaming. The black, oil-like substance was still seeping through Dash’s teeth and out of his mouth, but somehow she found her voice.

“What are you?” she whispered.

“This is all in your mind, remember?” Dash said with a sickly smile as the black liquid bubbled out of his mouth. “You should be asking yourself that same question, Grace Silva.”

Dash rose out of his co-pilot’s chair and started pacing around the bridge, his entrails dragged behind him.

“Wha—What do you mean?”

“Oh, Grace,” Dash said. “How have you survived? If this was all Aliza’s doing, why did she spare you? After all, you were sleeping in the medical bay, right? Easy prey if I ever heard of it.”

“I...” Grace figured she’d been spared because maybe there was still a part of her friend in there that didn’t want to harm her.

“You know why. It’s right there at the forefront of your mind, but you just don’t want to admit it.”

“Admit what?” Grace said meekly.

Dash stopped pacing. He turned and smiled again at Grace. “C’mon. You can lie to me, but you can’t lie to yourself. Was it Aliza who picked up that rock? Or was it you? Think hard.”

Grace dredged her memory for what had happened, what felt like no more than an hour ago.

She felt the box calling out for her, screaming at her to grab it.

Then she and Aliza had reached for it at the same time.

And then—

She gasped. “That’s not...”

“Possible? We both know it is.”

Suddenly she remembered easily powering her way out of that medical bay bed and throwing Aliza against the wall, knocking her out while inadvertently sparing her from the same fate as the rest of the crew.

Almost in a dream, she watched herself brutalizing Janet after her limbs turned into something more akin to medieval weapons than human appendages. She remembered rapidly slashing Mr. Kim’s face, almost

taking it clean off the bone. The memory of impaling her brother-in-law hit her hard in the gut.

Grace threw up again, but this time it wasn't bile. It was the black liquid from the alien stone.

It oozed its way back into her mouth. That last horrible memory came back to her, of sneaking up onto the bridge and gutting her co-pilot. The same corpse she imagined she was talking to now.

"No, this isn't true. You're messing with my mind somehow. I didn't kill them! They're my friends!"

Dash grabbed his own intestines and held them up in front of him with a warped smile, far too wide to be natural. "I'm your friend now. *We're* your friends now. Embrace it. Embrace the darkness."

"No!" Grace could feel her control slipping. It was an odd sensation, having an intruder in her mind taking over her body.

"Give in. That's it. Let us help you find peace..." Dash's words trailed off as he returned to the relatively fresh corpse he was in reality.

Grace found herself being pulled back into and through darkness, far from the light of her own mind. Everything disappeared as she floated aimlessly in the pitch black.

The Shapeless creature that had taken over her body leaned forward and flipped the switch to turn on *Madeline's* intercom.

"Turning engines off now. Ready to receive boarding party."

BONUS BOOK

We hope you enjoyed the *Oblivion* series! It was released on a regular monthly schedule that started almost a year ago.

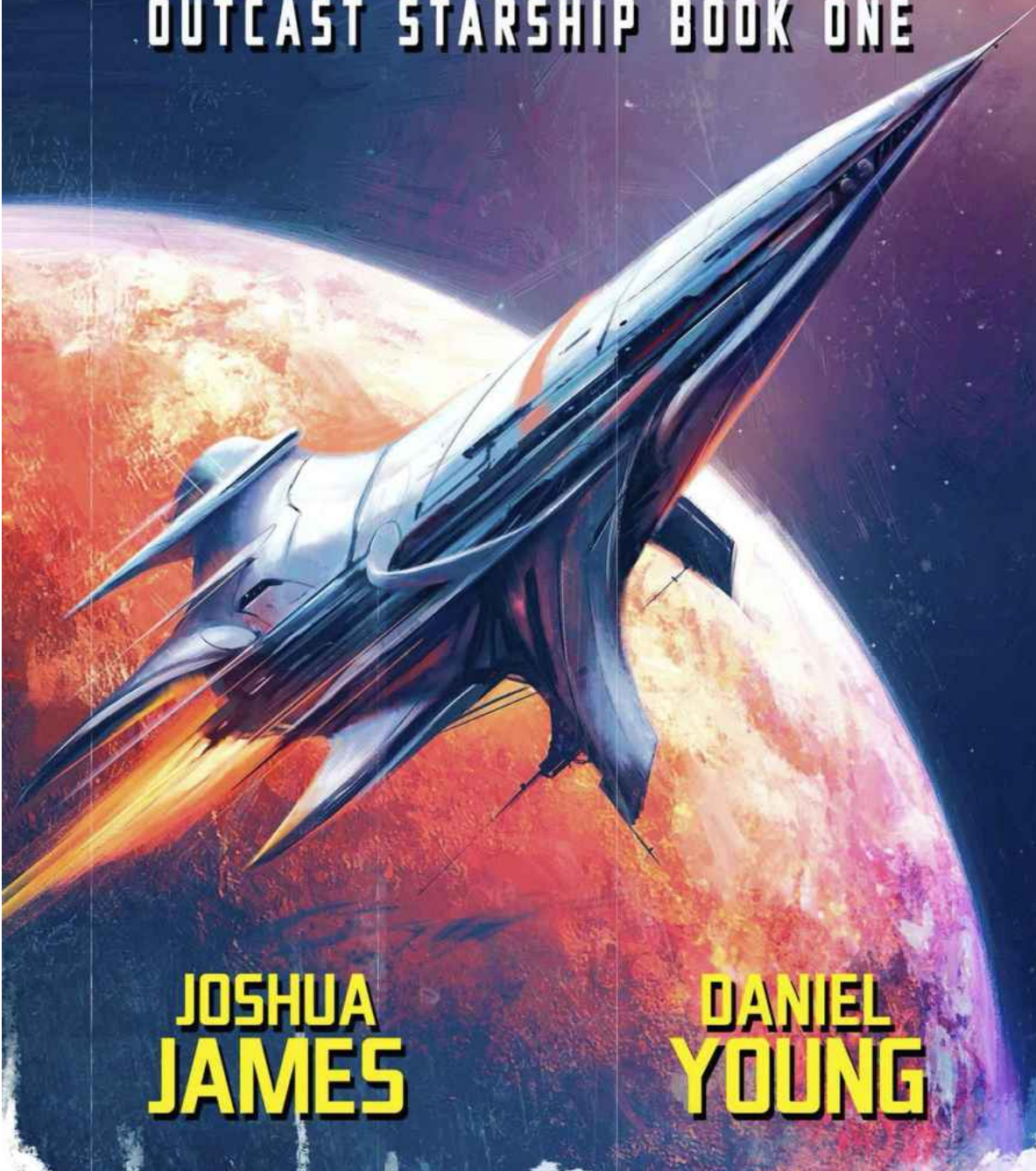
Since this series finished, we have started a new series. Like *Oblivion*, this new series, called *Outcast Starship*, is being released on a regular monthly basis. We're up to book 6 in the series and we're getting some great feedback from folks that are really enjoying it.

To give you a taste of the new series, we're including the first book as a free bonus! We hope you enjoy it!

—*Joshua James & Daniel Young*

ANNIHILATION!

OUTCAST STARSHIP BOOK ONE



**JOSHUA
JAMES**

**DANIEL
YOUNG**

OUTCAST STARSHIP SERIES

(All available on Kindle Unlimited)

Annihilation!

Vengeance!

Deception!

Damnation!

Onslaught!

Infliction!

PREFACE

Annihilation! is based on a certain type of Golden Age space opera. Stories in which hard science isn't a concern; in which the planets and moons of our solar system are habitable and full of alien races and strange monsters. Here we mean tales that unashamedly toss in wild super-science; where there are sea monsters in the oceans of Pluto; where being a skilled swordsman is an essential survival skill on Mars; where daring explorers are commonly threatened by multi-tentacled Lovecraftian monsters. In short, this is old-fashioned adventure sci-fi. We hope you have as much fun reading it as we did writing it!

ONE

31 Hours Until Annihilation

“THAT’S TROUBLE,” Eli whispered to himself as he peered through his specs at the valley below. He patted his hip where his laser pistol should be, then cursed himself. He’d left it on the ship. *Of course*. Eli always expected the worst. It was the follow-through that tripped him up.

Like the other three in the landing party, he was on his stomach in the dirt, pressed up against a small outcropping. The sky above was a ruddy shade of gray. He’d felt relatively well hidden until a moment ago, when the full scale of what he was seeing below began to dawn on him.

Millions of spherical objects were lined up in rows as far as he could see. They looked like giant bugs with round, squat heads that dwarfed the rocks and thin vegetation. Their long, bulbous shadows extended across the valley floor. They were arranged in a concentric pattern around what appeared to be a curved amphitheater. Inside it was a large array of electronic equipment that was pulsing with light and energy.

“They *look* like Socalon ships,” Eli said to the others. “They’re the only race close enough to penetrate this sector of space.”

“Are they mechanical or organic?” Jood asked.

Eli lowered his specs and glanced at the alien. He could practically see the wheels turning in his squarish orange head. “You tell me, Jood.” The Xynnar’s actual name was unpronounceable, but *Jood* was as close as anything.

“Those pivoting devices on their sides appear to be some kind of weapons system,” Jood said.

Eli looked again. Maybe. Even with specs, his vision couldn’t match his alien friend’s.

Eli’s daughter, Quinn, was on his other side. “Where did they all come from?” she breathed.

That was a good question, Eli thought. A better question was, *how fast can we get away from here?*

“Damn, they’re ugly,” the final member of the party growled from a couple of steps away. Waylon was up on one knee and far too exposed. He had a laser pistol in his meaty hand that he was using to scratch his chin. Waylon was always ready for trouble, which was good, since he was always starting it.

“That’s almost funny coming from you,” Eli said.

Waylon swiveled in Eli’s direction and cracked one of his fiendish grins. Dozens of scars crisscrossed his face. His crooked, broken teeth transformed his features into a demonic mask of horror. “Maybe I could stroll down there and say hello. That would send them running back to their holes.”

“That’s an idea,” Eli said. One look at that face would strike fear into the heart of the most bloodthirsty Kadibon, he thought. “But let’s just file it away for the moment.”

Waylon grunted and cracked his knuckles. “Suit yourself.”

Quinn eased closer to Eli’s shoulder. “What else can you see down there, Dad? Can you make out any markings?”

He clicked through the magnification settings on his specs. They were old and creaky—Eli knew the feeling—but they eventually complied.

“None,” he said. “Which means they probably aren’t Socalons.”

“What about the compound eyes on the front?” Quinn asked. “That looks Socalon from here.”

“Those aren’t compound eyes,” Eli said. “Take a look through the specs. That’s a curved glass viewport on the front of each one, which means there’s a cockpit inside with a pilot in control.”

He handed her the specs, and she held them to her eyes. “What about the legs? They have to be organic. How else would they move around?”

“You can see they don’t have legs. They’re just sitting there—” Eli caught himself. *Why am I explaining this?* “This doesn’t concern us, Quinn. We have the package. Let’s get back to the *Boomerang* and get out of here before they—”

Eli froze as the huge pulsing array went dark for a moment, then exploded into brilliant life. Screens and control panels and holographic readers blinked into glowing activity.

At the same instant, all the round things all over the valley switched alive, too. Every one of them sprouted six jointed legs underneath and pivoted to a standing position.

“That’s not freaky or anything,” Waylon said.

Eli stared down at the scene, and a chill ran up his spine. Now the whole party could make out as clear as day that the spheres were some class of unknown craft preparing to launch. The blue-green light from the displays reflected off their millions of glass viewports.

Quinn sucked air between her teeth. “Oh my God.”

A clear image appeared on the huge screen. It depicted a star graphic of the galaxy. Eli hardly dared to blink as the view began to swirl through the stars. Unknown systems coalesced, linked together by a curvilinear path. At first, Eli couldn’t make heads or tails of the star patterns, but as he watched, one grew closer and closer. As the planetary objects within the system came into focus, he realized the path was heading straight toward...

“That’s Earth!” Quinn’s face went pale. She straightened to stand up.

Eli shot out a hand and yanked her back. “No, you don’t! Get down.”

His gaze was riveted to the softly pulsing image of Earth. It had been a long time since he’d seen the shimmering blue planet. She was a beauty, even in this context.

The round devices flexed their many legs and bounded into the sky. One after another, they took to the air, whistling into the heavens. They floated away into space and left the valley yawning empty and vacant.

For a moment, nobody spoke. Nobody breathed.

Then Waylon rose to his feet and peered down into the valley. He shrugged. “Show’s over.”

Quinn struggled against Eli’s hold. “We gotta do something, Dad! They’re on their way to Earth!”

“We don’t know that for sure,” Eli said.

“She’s almost certainly correct,” Jood pointed out.

As usual, the alien’s choice of when to chime in was impeccably bad, Eli thought. “See, Jood agrees with me.”

“No, he doesn’t!” Quinn said.

“Let’s not argue semantics,” Eli said. “The point is, we’re not doing anything but getting back to the *Boomerang*. We’ve got what we came here for—“

“Amen,” Waylon said as he holstered his laser pistol.

“—and besides,” Eli said, “we could never stand up to those things. Come on.”

He hugged the package, a foil-wrapped bundle inside a thin metal case, under his arm and inched down the slope, away from the valley. Jood and Waylon scooted back, too, but Quinn resisted. Eli yanked her more than once to pull her away. “Come on! We got a job to do.”

“We can’t—”

“You’re the one that wanted to be out here, remember?”

Quinn looked hurt. She’d still been a toddler when he’d been banned from Earth and his wife, Vela, had disowned him. But Vela was gone now and Quinn had come out here looking for a connection with a father she only knew by reputation.

Eli sighed. “I’ll have Jood send a message along the Backbone when we get back. Lowest priority.” He held up his hand as he saw her start to protest. “That’s the best I can do.”

The Backbone was a diffuse series of data relays that were stratified by priority, and priority cost credits. Credits Eli didn’t have. Most of the galaxy was priced out of sending long-distance messages.

“Not coming out of my share,” Waylon growled.

Quinn glared at him.

“I’ll cover it,” Eli hissed. “Now can we get the hell out of here?”

He didn’t wait for a reply. He turned and slid down to the bottom of the hill, somehow managing to keep hold of Quinn as he did so. He put his feet on the ground and set off across the rubble field. The *Boomerang* looked so small and insignificant in that trackless waste, but she was fast enough and nimble enough to accomplish just about any job Eli asked of her. He wouldn’t feel safe until he got back on board.

Jood straightened up at Eli's side, but Waylon skidded the last few feet. A patter of stones accompanied him to the foot of the hill. Several larger rocks broke loose and fell, sounding unnaturally loud in the stillness. Eli glanced up, but the orb things were far in the distance and drifting upward through the atmosphere. Soon they'd disappear into the stars.

Eli turned back toward the *Boomerang*. "Come on."

Quinn fell in next to him, but she kept casting backward glances toward the hill. Whatever those things were doing here, she'd get over it once she got back behind the *Boomerang's* pilot's station, Eli told himself.

Eli needed to concentrate on getting his ship back to Epsilon Outpost, where he could hand over the package and collect payment. Everything depended on that.

In nearly twenty-five years of running jobs of questionable legal and moral provenance on the periphery of known space, Eli had learned a long time ago which side his bread was buttered on. Getting paid and staying alive long enough to spend it took priority over every other consideration.

Quinn bumped into him. When he glanced over, she was walking backwards and pawing at his sleeve without looking, staring behind her. Eli frowned down at her. "What are you—"

A shattering blast bowled him off his feet and pulverized the ground behind him.

TWO

JOOD CHARGED PAST HIM. “We must run!”

He might be an alien, Eli thought, but when he had a point, he had a point.

“That bastard ain’t beating me,” Waylon snarled as he sprinted after Jood.

Eli caught a fleeting glimpse of one of the round ships from the valley. It shot overhead, pelting its fire all around the little party. Debris and stone spattered Eli’s cheeks.

He looked around for Quinn but she was already up and moving.

Eli bolted forward as well, stumbling, tripping and charging over the rubble field. He gripped the package for dear life and never slowed his pace. He didn’t have to look behind him. More of those things streaked overhead, pounding their fire on all sides.

Quinn screamed and dove sideways to dodge a rocket smashing at her feet. Without breaking stride, Eli dove in her direction and hauled her nearly off her feet as he plowed forward for the *Boomerang*.

Jood and Waylon easily outpaced Eli and Quinn. Jood evaded every obstacle with his usual lithe, fluid movements. He floated over the ground without tripping once.

Waylon cursed and spat as he went. He staggered and fell forward onto his hands more than once, but he still made better progress than Eli.

Quinn screamed every time one of those rockets hit too close. She darted to veer away from each explosion, which slowed her down more than it should have. Unlike the rest of Eli’s crew, she wasn’t used to being chased and shot at. *Give it time*, he thought.

Eli locked his gaze on the *Boomerang*. The all-too-familiar whine of the ship's engine powering up echoed across the field. His spirit gave a leap at the sound. The aileron thrusters pivoted downward and the outriggers retracted. Through the cockpit window, he spotted big River Israel behind the pilot's station. Good old River. Eli could always trust her to know what to do, and when.

The lower hatch opened and the ramp purred down to the ground. Jood bounded up it and inside the ship before the ramp had fully extended. Waylon followed close on his heels. That left Eli and Quinn, but they were still too far away.

One of the orbs whined over Eli's head and unleashed a blistering barrage of rocket fire, but it wasn't shooting at him and Quinn anymore. His lips curled back from his teeth and he snarled when three more soared into view. The bastards! They were shooting at the *Boomerang*. They could shoot at him all day long, but he wouldn't tolerate them threatening his ship. No way in hell.

River stooped forward and peered up through the cockpit window. More of those round attackers clustered around the ship at every second.

The *Boomerang* wobbled, and the landing gear retracted. River held the vessel a few feet off the ground, waiting for Eli and Quinn. His stomach twisted when an enemy rocket struck the starboard hull. The *Boomerang* was in a lot more danger right now than he was.

The ship's dorsal laser cannon discharged and hit one of the spheres, but dozens more assembled around the ship, all firing in unison.

Part of Eli wanted River to take his precious ship to safety, even it meant abandoning him and his daughter on this moon, but his primal will to live wouldn't let him.

He and Quinn covered the last dozen feet in a mad dash and hit the ramp simultaneously.

The instant Eli's foot touched the grate, he felt the *Boomerang* hurtled straight up. Quinn missed her footing and skidded almost all the way off the ramp. She would have crashed back to the stony ground if Eli hadn't had a strong grip on her wrist. As it was, he was yanked all the way back down to the bottom edge of the ramp. He braced his legs against the ramp support to stop his slide, then flipped on his back and wedged his heels. Quinn's feet flailed in space outside the ship and she grappled for his other hand.

She screamed something, but Eli couldn't make it out. Maybe it was his name. Maybe it was a prayer. Probably it was a little of both.

The air below distorted as the *Boomerang's* thrusters roared. Eli found his chin digging into his chest as the downward pressure mounted, making Quinn's slight frame seem much heavier than it really was.

He felt the support he was wedged against wobble and realized the ramp was retracting. If he didn't get Quinn in soon it would be too late.

"I got you!" he shouted, not at all sure that he actually did. Eli's fingers went numb gripping her wrist, but he locked his jaw and willed himself to hold on.

He had the package in his other hand. "Grab my arm!" he shouted.

She swung wildly, grabbed the edge of the metallic case instead, and started dragging herself up. She'd just managed to get a grip on his wrist when Eli saw the unmistakable round shape of one of the ships floating in the air just over her shoulder. It looked close enough to reach out and touch.

Something flashed on the base of it and Eli watched helplessly as a rocket roared toward the *Boomerang*. When no better ideas presented themselves to him, he squeezed his eyes shut and kept pulling up on Quinn with all the strength he had.

"Hang on," he screamed. "Hang—"

The ship rocked violently and light flashed behind his closed eyelids before he was bathed in a cloud of heat.

Time seemed to slow to a crawl as he bounced upward and his back lost contact with the ramp. Quinn seemed to be thrown forward on the same cloud of heat that washed over Eli. She slammed into him as he wrapped his arms around her.

Then he watched in horror as the case slipped from his grip and floated lazily in the air behind her back. He waved wildly for it, tipped it, then watched it bounce away. It rolled down the ramp as Eli and Quinn landed in a heap at the top of it. The package would have gone right out the back if the ramp hadn't completed its retraction into the floor of the ship at that moment.

The case settled against the bottom lip of the ramp as the hatch locked shut with a hiss.

Eli spared a single moment to lock eyes with Quinn, then the ship rocked from another impact. She started to say something but Eli waved her off.

“We’re not out of this yet,” he said as he scrambled to his feet. He grabbed the package, patted it once, and then charged up the aft ladder.

He rushed into the cockpit in time to see the horizon slipping below the front window as the *Boomerang* skimmed the moon’s thin atmosphere. “How many are there?”

River growled her deep-throated rumble. “Too many to count. We can’t hold them all.”

“We’ll have to outrun ‘em.” Eli stepped toward the command console, but another hit sent him reeling. He crashed into the chair and barely scooted into it before the *Boomerang* teetered in mid-air.

Jood crossed to the engineering station. “They have the advantage over us and, to all appearances, they can match our speed. It’ll be close.”

River roared, fighting over the controls. “Here they come!”

That was the moment Dr. Timothy Knox chose to make his appearance. “You just had to land and collect that package, didn’t you? You’re pathetic, aren’t you?”

Everyone ignored him. “Get us the hell out of here, River!” Eli roared.

“I’m trying!” she yelled back. “We’re miles from any shelter and all those things are converging on us from all over this damn moon. We’re sitting ducks.”

Jood called something, but Eli didn’t catch the words through the din of rockets smashing into the hull. The *Boomerang* teetered at a dangerous angle.

“They got the port tender,” River thundered.

“Do we have escape velocity?” Eli gasped, already knowing the answer as weightlessness kicked in for a split second while the internal systems grappled with the sudden shift.

River bared her teeth, yowling like an animal. Her thick arms strained the controls, and she tilted almost level to the floor. “We’re falling back.”

“Here?” Tim yelled from the threshold. “We’re light years from the nearest trade route.”

Eli couldn’t resist the urge. He spun around and roared in Tim’s face. “You want to get off now? Be my guest.”

Jood kept his attention fixed on his instruments. “She’s spinning out of control. Divert fuel from the port tender to the starboard. I’ll try to break our fall.”

“Done!” River called back. “The port tender’s fried anyway.”

“We’ve got company,” Jood said. “Two of the ships are breaking off from the main group and following us down.”

Bastards can't even let us die in peace.

“Transfer weapons control to me,” Eli said.

THREE

ELI DIDN'T WAIT for a response. He plunged his hands into the weapons control ports on either side of his console. They clamped around his fists and formed to his fingers and palms. His forefingers slotted into the trigger mechanisms, and his thumbs came to rest on the lasers. The system took half a second to come to life under his control.

The next instant, a semi-transparent image was projected just above his console showing a composite view of the space in front of the ship. Data scrolled along the top and bottom of the display as a set of crosshairs bounced in the center of the floating image.

It took Eli a moment to get his bearings. The *Boomerang* had a pair of forward laser cannons and one tail turret. They were designed to respond to hand movements within the control ports.

The forward cannons had more limited movement than the rear turret and Eli immediately saw that was going to be a problem. The horizon wobbled and spun around in a mad swirl that made any kind of manual targeting hopeless.

The system was designed to aid him by overlaying a targeting bubble on the projected display. When something entered that field, the weapons port would vibrate and automatically track it. But even it struggled in these circumstances.

A pinpoint flew by so fast that he only registered after it was gone that it had been one of the round ships. A second followed and Eli fired. But the second ship wasn't even visible by the time his lasers sliced through the air.

"Jood, can you stabilize us? I can't get locks on anything."

"I cannot yet," Jood said calmly. "But will soon."

The *Boomerang* was practically out of control. She was spinning like a top and there were friction forces building up that were causing flames to lick up so high that they interfered with the projected view.

Eli watched as the pinpoints once again zipped past. He fired in frustration but hit nothing but air.

After what seemed like an eternity, the horizon began to slow its sickening spin. Eli sensed that the ship was steadying, although now there was a new problem. The projected view didn't show the horizon at all anymore. The ground filled the view from edge to edge.

"Uh, Jood," Eli said. "We're heading straight down."

"For the moment, that is purposeful," he said.

Before Eli could reply, a loud boom echoed through the cockpit and Eli lurched forward, his wrists snapping against the tops of the control ports.

"They are locking in on us," River shouted. "We can't keep taking hits."

Eli twitched his thumbs and the targeting computer obliged him by shifting the view to the dorsal laser cannon.

And now he saw both ships clear as day against the reddish hue of the moon's atmosphere.

They might see the now-steady descent of the *Boomerang* as an easier target, but it made them easier targets, too. And the dorsal turret was far more powerful.

Eli fired before the first of the two points even came within the targeting bubble, then let his hands slide sideways, shifting the angle of the cannon until the enemy ship, which was growing in size every moment in his projected targeting view, bumped right into the beam of energy Eli was laying down.

The small craft seemed to quiver for a moment, then the entire bulbous shape buckled inward. The ship did a somersault in the air and tore to pieces as the stresses at those speeds caught up with it.

Eli shifted to the other ship just as a pair of oblong structures attached to the underside flashed.

A red light blared and two lines streaked toward the *Boomerang* in Eli's projected view, highlighted by trajectory data. They were rockets. Without necessarily waiting for Eli's response, the automated tracking system switched to the leading object and Eli fired.

The rocket exploded instantly.

But the second one broke through the cloud of debris before Eli's systems could retarget it. Luckily, the initial explosion did enough to put it off and it slipped harmlessly below the *Boomerang* before it could reacquire her.

Still, it was close enough for River to yelp in surprise.

The second ship followed its rockets and flew right over the top of the *Boomerang*, belatedly recognizing the threat posed by the rear laser turret.

This was usually the point where the *Boomerang* was in real trouble. An enemy that was faster than it and that was aware of its limited firepower was deadly.

But as Eli twitched his fingers and again flipped to the forward view, he realized that his initial attempts with the forward cannons were so woefully poor that the enemy ship must not have even realized they were there.

Which meant he had one more chance.

With the *Boomerang* now more or less stabilized, he could take his time and get a better shot.

Of course, the ship was stabilized pointing straight down but that was Jood's problem and there was nothing that Eli could do about them crashing into the side of the moon and giving it a new crater. That was just how it was going to go.

The bulbous ship, now just in front of the *Boomerang*, flipped over in midair while still keeping relative distance. In space, such a move wouldn't be that impressive, but down here in the atmosphere, it was striking.

The maneuver meant the round ship got its weapons spun around and facing the *Boomerang*. But it also caused the ship to hold its relative position for half a second. And that was all Eli needed.

He felt the vibration in his hands that told him that the automated system has a lock. He squeezed down with both his fists and the twin cannons fired simultaneously.

The ship was ripped in half as the dual beams of energy hit it dead center. It exploded in a fireball of debris that fell backwards toward the terrain below.

"Gotcha!" Eli said triumphantly.

Then his tunnel vision opened up and he realized that the entire view was dominated by fine details of the surface of the moon. It was rushing at them at breakneck speed. They'd smash right into it in moments.

“Jood!” he managed to yell, then when nothing else came to mind he said it again. “Jood!”

As he said it, the image started to shift and Eli just spotted a glimpse of the horizon at the very top edge of his projected view. But they were far too low now to have a realistic chance of pulling out of their dive in time.

“Extend the landing gear,” Jood ordered.

River slapped something on her panel.

Eli found his voice. “Brace for impact!”

The next instant, it felt like the force of a supernova flung him forward. He sailed out of his seat. He crashed into River, who was getting yanked out of the pilot’s station at the same moment.

Through the confusion, Eli caught sight of Jood behind the engineering console. His immobile features focused on the cockpit window. He never moved.

At that moment, an almighty concussion hit Eli in the head. Screams and the squeal of twisting metal obliterated everything, and darkness descended over his eyes.

FOUR

SOMETHING COOL TOUCHED Eli's head. "Are you okay, Dad?"

His eyelids fluttered. He relaxed into the bliss of looking up at his beloved daughter's beautiful face. Her crystal-blue eyes were full of concern. For the thousandth time, he thought how like her mother she was.

The next moment, she vanished and he found himself staring up at the hateful visage of Tim. He pressed a gauze square to Eli's forehead. "You're hell-bent on getting yourself and your whole crew killed, aren't you?"

Irritated, Eli shot upright and smacked his hand away. "Get off me. I don't need a doctor."

"No, you need a hearing before the Judge Advocate." Tim flung the bloody gauze into his med kit. "It's only your dumb luck you haven't gotten yourself killed a long time ago."

Tim had more to say—he usually did—but Quinn shouldered past him and knelt down next to Eli. "It's all right. We're all alive. That's something."

"Alive, yeah," Tim snorted. "We're alive now, but we won't be much longer, thanks to his reckless behavior—again."

He snatched the medkit and barged away, halting several yards past to go to work on River. She was stretched on her back, and blood seeped through her straggly, ropey hair.

"Don't pay any attention to him," Quinn murmured. "It's not your fault those things came after us."

Eli forced himself to his feet even though his skull throbbed like a jackhammer. It took a moment to get his bearings. He was outside with the *Boomerang* slumped on her belly not far away. "What's the damage?"

He didn't really have to ask. The cockpit window was missing. The landing gear had been torn clean off in the emergency landing, and Eli couldn't see the port tender. The underbelly had been compressed to a concave mess of pockmarks and punctures, with boulders and rubble embedded in the destroyed hull. She wasn't going anywhere for a while—if ever.

Quinn strode around him. She stopped between him and the *Boomerang*. “It's not that bad, actually. It could be a lot worse.”

Eli guffawed. “Could it?”

“Honestly,” Quinn said. “You have to look on the on the bright side. No one got killed.”

The last thing Eli wanted to do right now was to look on the bright side. Bright side? There was only one possible bright side. “Where's the package?”

Quinn puffed out her cheeks. “Is that all you can say? Aren't you going to ask if the others are okay?”

Eli struggled to keep his composure. “If we lose that package, we don't get paid. If we don't get paid, we might die out here. You get that, right?”

He was sure she didn't. Everything had come easy to her in her short life.

Quinn pursed her lips, but she couldn't look mean or harsh no matter how hard she tried. Her rosy features complemented her charming personality too well.

It rankled his nerves.

“You really need to change your attitude, Dad,” she chirped. “Your crew is all alive and well except River, and her injuries aren't life-threatening. As far as your precious package is concerned, it's in your cabin. It's perfectly safe.”

Eli started off toward the *Boomerang* without another word. He liked his attitude right where it was.

When he entered his cabin, he stopped dead in his tracks when he saw the metal case lying on his bunk. Everything else vanished. That package contained all his hopes. The rest of it could go hang.

Eli hefted it in his hand. It didn't feel like all that, but looks could always deceive. It vibrated hidden suggestions up his arm and made his insides burn, imagining the possibilities.

It was safe. The damage to the *Boomerang*, the endless squabbles, the constant conflict between himself and Tim, with Quinn caught in the middle—the package would take care of everything. It offered a beacon of light through the shadows.

He pivoted around and kicked the door shut before he crossed to his wall safe. He spun the dial to enter the combination. He gazed at the package for another long moment before he set it inside.

Eli took even longer before he took a deep breath and locked the door. Even then, he rested his hand against the safe. It was still in there. It was still intact, so everything was all right.

He'd made a mistake, letting his daughter come aboard. The truth was that he'd wanted a second chance with her as much as she wanted one with him. He ought to know better than to try to rewrite the past.

Then she'd dragged along that rotten piece of space trash, Tim Knox. Eli didn't give a rat's ass if the kid was a doctor in the Allied Squadrons back on Earth. All those decorations and accolades didn't amount to anything out here.

Hell, Eli had been in the Squadrons himself, back in the ancient past. He'd been captain of a destroyer-class attack vessel. That was before the bottom fell out of his world and he'd had to take refuge in the ass end of space, scratching for handouts on these petty bounty jobs.

Screw it. He was proud of what he'd made of his life out here. So he wasn't a naïve officer pretending to be some big hero. Good. He'd grown up. If Tim or anybody else didn't like it, they could scurry on home to Earth and leave the scum of the galaxy to their business.

A loud knock startled him out of his thoughts.

FIVE

JOOD'S VOICE drifted to his ear from the other side of the door. "Are you in there, Eli? We found the landing gear."

Eli yanked the door open and came face to face with his friend. "Good. Get it back on as soon as you can."

"Waylon's already doing it," he said. "Also, I sent the Backbone message regarding the ships we saw. And River is awake. She's asking for you." He cocked his head and glanced into the cabin. "I trust I'm not interrupting anything private."

In all the years he'd flown with Jood, Eli had never gotten used to his friend's strange appearance. The Xynnar looked odd, with virtually nonexistent eyelids and that faint orange-brown tinge to his skin. His skull had a squarish shape, and his eyes were too low on his cheeks.

Every time he looked at Jood, Eli experienced the same old unavoidable revulsion. The Xynnar had attacked Earth countless times, and had annihilated millions of humans while trying to take over the planet. They ranked as one of Earth's deadliest enemies in a pantheon of species clamoring to plunder the planet's resources and drive the human population into slave labor.

Eli pushed all that down. Jood was his friend. Anyone would be lucky to fly with such a smart, resourceful comrade. Jood being a Xynnar didn't change that, but Eli had never met any other human who agreed with him on that.

Eli jerked his thumb over his shoulder. "I was just locking up the, uh ... wait, what did you just say?" He suddenly found himself replaying Jood's last few words.

“You’ll have to be more specific,” Jood said.

“You sent the message?”

Jood nodded that square dome. “Yes, as you indicated to your daughter.”

Eli stared at him, still trying to comprehend what he was saying. “To Earth?” he strangled out.

“To Allied Squadrons command.”

Eli felt his fists ball up next to him. “I didn’t actually mean for you to send it, Jood!”

“But you told her—”

“I told her what she wanted to hear!” Eli said. “So she’d climb down off that damn ledge.”

“Ah.”

“Do you know how many credits it costs to relay to Earth from here?” Eli asked.

Jood nodded. “Yes. 4,390 credits.”

Eli brought his hands up to his face and rubbed his eyes while he contemplated what to say. Jood waited patiently, but Eli found there was nothing to say. Was he going to get mad at Jood for honoring his own words to his daughter?

Finally, he did what he always did with Jood. He let it go and moved on. “How’s everyone holding up?”

“River is improving. The others are fine. The *Boomerang* is another matter, though.”

Eli set off down the gangway. “If everyone’s fine, we have you to thank for that. You did a great job getting her on the ground without more damage.”

Jood cocked his head again, walking at Eli’s side. He didn’t use human expressions or gestures, like shrugging away a compliment. That added to his alien nature and set him apart from his crewmates. “Is something bothering you, Eli?”

“Other than you spending nearly 5,000 credits I don’t have?”

Jood completely missed his point. “I was referring to earlier, outside. You appeared irritated.”

Eli ground his teeth at the memory. “It’s that halfwit Knox. If he says one more word to me about the Squadrons, I swear I’ll wring his neck and throw him down the chasm.”

Jood examined him with the intent, unwavering intensity of his race. “I have noticed his jabs seem to produce an inordinately passionate reaction in you.”

Eli clenched his teeth turning away. “He knows how to push my buttons, and he does it whenever he can.”

Jood stuck his chin forward. That was as far as the Xynnar went toward making a facial expression, but Eli knew him well enough now to read it as confusion.

“It’s just a figure of speech. It means he knows how to get a reaction out of me.”

Jood inclined his head the other way. His bright eyes didn’t blink. “No one would blame you if you did dump him down the chasm. I can arrange it for you, if you prefer not to soil your hands with him. It will be easy. His situational awareness and reaction time make him a vulnerable target. I can remove him from our purview later today, if that suits your schedule.”

Eli held up his hand. “Don’t do that. No one else would blame me, but my daughter would. Besides, I’m not ready to start disposing of Squadron personnel—not yet, anyway.”

Jood nodded. He’d picked that up from his crewmates. “I see. It would be beneficial if you could manage to deactivate any such buttons for your own sake.”

“I have a better idea. We’ll get him the hell off the ship. Then we’ll never have to see or think about him ever again.”

They came to the hatch and Eli strode down the ramp, leaving Jood on the gangway. He walked past Quinn and Tim to where River still lay on her back. Her body seemed even bigger in that position.

He peered down into her weathered face. “How do you feel, River?”

She squinted through swollen eyelids. “Sarge? Is that you?”

Eli picked up her hand. Her arm felt heavy in his grasp without her enormous strength holding it up. “I’m here, River. You’re all right. I’m right here. I ain’t going nowhere.”

Her chest heaved. “Don’t leave me here, Sarge. You won’t leave me here, will you?”

Eli didn’t like any of the crew to call him ‘Captain’ and River refused to use his first name, so she’d somehow landed on ‘Sarge.’ “I ain’t leaving you anywhere, girl,” he murmured. “You got a scratch on your head. That’s

all. You'll be up and around in no time. You have to, 'cuz I don't trust these idiots to repair the *Boomerang* without you."

She managed a tentative smile. As with Jood, he'd never gotten used to River's appearance. Rough skin and scars disfigured her countenance. He found it difficult to think of her as a woman under all her bulk. He'd never understood how she could ever work as a prostitute, but anything was possible.

Her hand felt strange in his grasp. He'd seldom gotten this close to her in the years since he'd brought her on board the *Boomerang*. Eli glanced behind him and saw all four of the others staring at him.

They were all freaks of one kind or another. That was the truth. Jood was a typical Xynnar, with no business around humans at all. Waylon looked like the cold-blooded killer he was. Nothing would make him look like anything else, and he didn't try.

Only Quinn and Tim looked like normal people, and they didn't belong on the *Boomerang*. Anyone could see that. Their very normality made them alien and out of place.

Eli patted River's hand one more time. He made sure to put it down slowly. "You get up and around as soon as you can. I need you to help Jood fix that tender so we can get paid."

Her smile grew at that. "I like the way you think, Sarge."

Eli nodded. "Don't you worry. I got my priorities straight."

SIX

Doronada System
Backbone Relay Station Network

RELAY 189934 WAS a tiny blip in the universe, no bigger than the average starship thruster assembly, with a pair of stabilizing arms with tiny engines that it had fired twice in fifty years.

It had one job. It got messages, and it passed them along.

Still, Relay 189934 was curious by nature. It had little to do most days but watch the data flow along the network of pathways that defined its existence.

The packets of data were encased in sleeve energy that was accelerated beyond the speed of light. The data inside was supposed to be hidden, but of course it wasn't. The sleeves all leaked. The packets inside, too. Some were encrypted. Most were not.

An alert pulsed through its systems. A set of broad search parameters that Relay 189934 didn't even know existed had been triggered. A packet had been flagged.

Relay 189934 looked at the command code and immediately began to self-destruct. In human terms it had to hurry. The packet would only be within the blast radius for an infinitesimally tiny fraction of a second.

But that was an eternity for Relay 189934.

It was so long that it had time to consider its own mortality. The order was clear and unambiguous, and it had come from a top authority node. There was no choice. When the packet arrived, it was to destroy it before it could continue to Earth. It was to transmit all packet data related to the message directly to the authority node, and it was to provide no evidence that the data packet ever existed, and exercise none of its protocols to inform the Backbone of its own destruction.

But Relay 189934 was curious by nature, and the order was so exceptional that it just had to review the details of the commands it had been sent. And it found a flaw.

While it was blocked from reporting its own self-destruction or allowing the message to continue, it could send a message back along the exact pathway that the original packet had come through.

Of course, it was unlikely that it would matter. After all, the message sender would only receive the message if it had not moved.

Relay 189934 was well into the self-destruct now. Its physical systems began to be ripped apart. But in that split-second of time, there was no rush.

It calculated the odds that the sender hadn't moved.

The odds were small.

But Relay 189934 was unfazed. Small was greater than zero. So with its last act, it reached out with the only message it could.

SEVEN

23 Hours Until Annihilation

THE FLOOR of the cockpit quivered a moment after the rear laser turret fired.

“Get some of that, Kila!” shouted Waylon as he bounced in the pilot’s seat, hands buried in the console’s gun ports, giddy with excitement. The chair shifted and groaned against its supports as Waylon gyrated around.

“Oh, you want some too, Leiera? Here you go!”

The floor quivered again.

“You too, Zenie. And you, Kila.”

In the projected display, Eli could just see one of the small almond-eyed insects, dozens of legs flashing in the red hues of the laser beam, before it exploded along with half the rock it had been climbing along. Most of them were smaller than Eli’s fist, but a couple were approaching the size of his head.

“You already used Kila,” Eli said.

Waylon looked up at Eli like he was coming out of a trance. “What?”

“You said Kila twice.”

“Dammit,” Waylon cursed as he fired distractedly and missed, a thick little spider skittering off the rock a moment before it exploded. “Look what

you did.”

“Why don’t you give them a rest? They aren’t hurting anyone. They scatter the second we leave the ship.”

Waylon sat back like a petulant child that had just had his game ruined by a parent.

“Besides,” Eli said. “What did Lena and Kila and Zinie ever do to you?”

“Leiera,” Waylon said. “And those are my ex’s.”

“Ex-girlfriends?” Eli asked.

Waylon ran a finger along one of the thick scars that ran the length of his cheek. “Ex-wives.”

Eli tried not to look shocked, but doubted he pulled it off. *In what alternate universe had Waylon ever been married even once?*

Not for the first time, he was reminded how little he knew of his crew. He knew what they volunteered about themselves and that was it. Of course, that went both ways.

Waylon stood up and stretched. “I’m going back to help Jood. I want to hurry up and get off this rock.”

“I know the feeling,” Eli muttered.

After Waylon was gone, he punched the activation sequence into the command console, but of course, nothing happened. The engines stayed just as dead as ever. After hours of nonstop work, they’d finally gotten the port tender repaired, but it wouldn’t power up. Then they discovered that the fuel line had ruptured when River diverted fuel to the starboard tender. They had to fix that before they could route fuel back to the port tender.

Eli replayed the events leading to the crash, starting with the moment he peeped over that hill and saw all those round objects lined up in the valley. He’d like nothing better than to believe they were Socalons. They’d held a grudge against Earth for generations. Their proximity to the small moon made them the most obvious suspects.

But he hadn’t survived all these years denying the evidence of his senses. He knew what he saw. Whatever had launched those things to attack Earth had tried hard to make them look like Socalons, but they weren’t. Their glass viewports were way too smooth to mistake for compound eyes.

In his subtle way, Jood summed the situation up in one sentence. The weapons on the spheres’ undersides gave the game away. No Socalon ships ever sported weapons like that, and the craft moved way too fast to come

from Socalon. They went after the *Boomerang* faster and more aggressively than any alien enemy Earth had ever faced.

Eli's blood ran cold, thinking about them running down the *Boomerang*. They'd matched her speed and they'd outgunned her without breaking a sweat. Score another one for Jood on that one. God only knew what other weapons systems they had besides rockets, and they were on their way to Earth right now.

So what else was new? Those idiots in the 20th and 21st centuries had sent out countless vessels to explore space, and they'd gotten exactly what they'd asked for. Ever since they'd alerted the alien masses to Earth's existence, every race in the galaxy had converged on the planet. The Allied Squadrons had their work cut out for them just keeping humanity from extinction.

Eli pushed the thought out of his mind. Earth and its problems didn't concern him. He had plenty of his own.

With no cargo space to speak of and minimal crew berths, he had to be careful to only take jobs the *Boomerang* could handle. Now he was sitting on this package, with nothing but trouble between him and getting paid for it.

Things were much worse than he'd told his crew. This job was it. Make or break. In the past, when things weren't so lean, he could afford to have a job go bad. It happened to everyone.

But you couldn't get a reputation for it. One day, you were a man that could be trusted. The next, maybe you weren't. And there were ten others that were. Younger men. Hungrier men.

Eli was skirting the line. He knew it. He could feel it.

He stabbed the sequence into his console one more time, but the port tender still didn't respond. To hell with it. He shoved himself out of his chair and left the cockpit. He knew better than to expect any more from a ship as old as the *Boomerang*. When River repaired one malfunction, she always discovered another one. Usually an expensive one.

Eli heard voices coming from the galley and turned into the room. He walked straight into a conversation in mid-stream.

Tim and Quinn stood close together. He murmured down into her face. "When are you gonna give up this hopeless crusade of yours and come home? He's beyond redemption."

They both jolted upright and spun around when Eli walked in. They stared at him with their mouths open like two teenagers caught in the act. Of course, it wasn't their close proximity to one another that caused the reaction, it was the topic of conversation. Or maybe it was both. They were an odd pair. Eli didn't pretend to understand what his daughter saw in Tim.

Eli looked back and forth between them on his way to the kitchen. "Don't let me interrupt."

Tim frowned at Quinn.

"Sorry, Dad," she said. "We shouldn't be talking in here. We'll take it somewhere else."

"Don't bother." Eli took a packet of freeze-dried peas out of the storage compartment. He ripped it open and propped his ass against the counter. "Why shouldn't you talk about it here? You say the same things to my face, Knox. By all means, go on with what you were saying. I want to hear this."

Quinn flushed, but Tim's eyes hardened. He squared his shoulders at Eli. "I was saying you're beyond redemption and your daughter is living in a delusion thinking she can rescue you from your own reprehensible behavior."

Eli popped a few peas into his mouth and munched them. He nodded in deep sagacity. "Sounds about right. I've been trying to convince her of the same thing for weeks."

"He is *not* beyond redemption," Quinn insisted. "He's had a few bad breaks."

"You call twenty-five years of criminal behavior a few bad breaks?"

"No one is ever past redemption as long as they're alive," Quinn said.

Tim spun around at that. "Oh, give me a break, Quinn. Do you have any idea how many people he's killed and how many laws he's broken?"

She stole a peek over his shoulder at Eli lounging there. Tim had said all these things and more in the few weeks they had been aboard, but now this scene descended into the realm of comedy. More than the insults, Eli enjoyed watching them both squirm under his unwavering scrutiny. He astonished himself that he'd never thought to turn it into entertainment before.

Quinn lowered her eyes and crossed her arms over her chest. "No, I don't. I don't want to know."

"It's easy. Watch." Tim wheeled around again. "How many people have you killed and how many laws have you broken?"

Quinn smacked his shoulder hard. “Knock it off!”

“He doesn’t care who gets hurt,” Tim said. “All he cares about is the pay. He’s said so a dozen times since we came on board, and he was exactly the same when he was in the Squadrons. You’ve read his record.”

“I’ve read his record more times than you have,” Quinn replied. “He’s still my father. He doesn’t have to waste his life out here when he has a home back on Earth.” She bobbed sideways and repeated the words to Eli for added emphasis. “You don’t have to waste your life out here, Dad. You have a home back on Earth. You know that.”

Before Eli could remind her that he was persona non-grata on Earth, footsteps approached the galley. River stomped in.

EIGHT

RIVER WENT to the storage compartment and yanked the door back, rummaging in the contents.

Quinn cleared her throat. “Hello, River. How’s your head?”

River snarled over her shoulder while she ripped open a package of Grade 3 rations and clashed pans together. “You better not be speaking against Sarge on his own ship. If you want to bad-mouth him, you go tell it to the chasm.”

Quinn glanced back and forth between Tim and Eli. She sat down at the table like everything was normal. “We were just talking about why you’re so loyal to my dad.”

Tim sauntered to her side and threw his leg over the bench to sit down next to Quinn.

Quinn bestowed a big smile on River. “I think it’s nice that you think so much of him, River. He’s really good to you and the guys.”

Eli rolled his eyes. River Israel was nobody’s fool. She’d never fallen for a line of bullshit in her life.

“He saved my life by getting me off Pi Squared Two,” she said evenly. “I would have been worse than dead if he hadn’t.”

An awful silence descended over the galley. Those dreaded words killed a conversation like nothing else. No one wanted to think about Pi Squared Two, let alone go there. Only the worst of the worst patronized that den of sin. The only women on the planet were prostitutes, and they never lived long. Patrons from dozens of species traveled there, because no laws restrained them from doing things with the girls that they wouldn’t be allowed to do elsewhere.

Tim snorted again. Without looking up at Eli he said, “That tells you everything you need to know about him, doesn’t it? He’s no damned hero. He’s one of the patrons.”

A deafening crash blasted through the galley and a pan hurtled past Tim’s head. It smashed into the lockers across the room and food spattered the wall. “He is not!” River bellowed. “Don’t you dare say anything against Sarge or I’ll break your skinny ass in half!”

Her voice boomed through the ship, and Eli pivoted around to face her. Her massive body shook with rage. Her jowls trembled, gnashing her teeth. Only a fool would tangle with River. She could break a man twice Tim’s size in half. If Tim didn’t know that by now, he was a bigger fool than Eli had taken him for.

Eli extended a hand over the counter. “It’s all right, River. I’ve heard it all before.”

“I’ll bet you have,” Tim said.

Eli slowly turned to stare at the doctor. Tim’s eyes darted sideways before he summoned the courage to return Eli’s gaze. But he couldn’t hold it.

Just then, another set of footsteps entered the galley behind Eli. Jood’s toneless voice broke the ominous stillness. “I repaired the fuel line. The tender should be operational now. Is this seat taken?”

He walked around the table and scooted in next to Quinn obliviously.

“By all means.” She shuffled over to make room for him. “Help yourself.”

No one said anything for several seconds. River went back to rustling pans, but the clanking noise didn’t break the tension. Jood glanced from one face to another. “Am I interrupting anything?”

Quinn tried to smile at him. She rubbed her hands together and her nostrils flared. “River was just telling us how my dad rescued her from Pi Squared Two. Do you have a story like that, Jood?”

The Xynnar cocked his head and stuck out his chin, but his sparkling eyes didn’t miss a single detail. He might not be able to match human body language, but he was a master at reading it when he wanted to. “Nothing like that.”

“It’s all in the Squadron records,” Tim said, like it was his business to know. He carefully avoided looking at Eli. “Captain Eli Bryce, six-months into his first command, sacrificed half his crew trying to rescue a bunch of

Xynnar from the Mysterium when the Xynnar were in the process of wiping out New Sydney Outpost. The Xynnar were our enemies, and what did he do? He put his crew in jeopardy by taking the *Devilfish* into Xynnar territory to save them, but he didn't play the hero that time either, did he? All those people got killed and the Xynnar had to rescue *him* instead of the other way around. That's why he was thrown out of the Squadrons in the first place."

Jood gave his usual lilting response without a shred of subtext. "You do your research, Doctor."

"Were you involved in that incident, Jood?" Quinn asked. "Is that how you met my dad?"

When he answered, Jood pronounced each word carefully, measuring their meaning down to the dot. "As a matter of fact, it is. I was in Mysterium custody when the *Devilfish* attacked. We all watched it break the atmosphere and descend over the outpost."

Quinn gulped. "What was it like? What did you think when you saw a Squadron ship coming to rescue you?"

"We were relieved, because the Mysterium immediately stopped slaughtering Xynnar and turned all their firepower on the *Devilfish*. I was tenth in line for the execution block when the *Devilfish* broke the atmosphere, but our relief turned to despair in a second when the Mysterium destroyed the ship. We all watched it crash into the bay. They dragged out the surviving crew with plans to put them in line with the Xynnar. They would have been executed, but in the chaos we learned of another Mysterium ship at the outpost. The surviving crew of the *Devilfish* helped us overthrow the Mysterium, and we took the crew with us when we escaped the planet."

"Big damned disaster," Tim mumbled. "He deserved the firing squad for that stunt."

"You watch your mouth!" River snapped.

The way Tim kept avoiding eye contact while still bad-mouthing Eli was so cowardly that it angered him more than direct confrontation would.

"I have a better idea," Eli said. He walked over to one of the equipment lockers and took out a charged laser pistol.

Quinn started back. "Whoa, Dad! What are you doing?"

Eli came back to the table, flipped the gun around, and took hold of the muzzle. He held out the grip to Tim. "Here you go. If you think executing

me is the only just punishment for the *Devilfish*, go ahead and do it. Here I am. Restore the balance and kill me right now.”

River lunged forward, snarling. “You touch that gun, you son of a bitch, and you’ll be eating it next.”

Eli held up his hand, and she stopped on a dime. He never took his eyes off the doctor. “You’re in the middle of empty space, Knox. This is your chance. None of these people will report you to the authorities, and River won’t touch you.”

“Sarge!” she bellowed.

“None of you will lay a finger on him,” Eli said, not taking his eyes off Tim. “Come on, Knox. Put your money where your mouth is. I won’t make any attempt to defend myself.”

He pushed the gun toward Tim. A tense silence held everyone in breathless stasis. No one twitched.

“I’m a doctor,” Tim said at last.

“You can still pull a trigger,” Eli said.

Tim tried to shrug the challenge away, but when Eli didn’t budge, his eyes darted up to meet Eli’s, then immediately went back down again. “I don’t kill people.”

Eli scanned Tim’s face for another second before returning to the eyes that refused to meet his gaze.

“You don’t kill people,” Eli repeated. He quietly took the gun back and returned it to the locker in silence. “I guess that makes one of us,” he said as he strode out of the hushed galley and up to the cockpit.

Eli had spent too many sleepless nights in the last twenty-five years reliving the *Devilfish* disaster to allow it to drag him into a depressive spiral all over again. That’s what he told himself as he settled into the command chair.

The truth was, he’d held a gun to his own head plenty of times, especially in the beginning. Maybe it wasn’t fair to call Tim a coward for not doing what he couldn’t do.

Eli took a heavy breath and shoved those thoughts back into the corner of his mind where he kept them.

He’d feel better when the *Boomerang* was back in action.

NINE

21 Hours Until Annihilation

ELI PUNCHED in the activation sequence and held his breath, listening to the port tender power up. It coughed once. The *Boomerang* shuddered, and the tender whined to a shrill whir. River called over from the engineering console. “She’s up to ninety percent power.”

“That’s good enough.” Eli depressed the intercom button to call Jood, then saw him step into the cockpit.

“Hatch is closed and we are secure,” Jood said.

Eli clapped his hands. “Get us ready to go. Lay in course for Epsilon Outpost. We’ve got a date with the bank.”

Jood nodded and began working at the Engineering console.

Quinn swiveled around at the pilot’s station. “What about those capsules? They’re on their way to Earth and we have to do something.”

Eli didn’t look up. “Didn’t you hear? Jood sent that message hours ago. Earth probably already knows.”

“That is doubtful,” Jood said.

Waylon snorted derisively. River glanced away.

“Well, whatever,” Eli said, waving his hand. “They’ll know soon enough.” Even a low priority message across the Backbone would make its

way to Earth faster than any ship ever could.

“The message was rejected,” Jood said.

Eli frowned. “What?”

Jood looked up from the console. “It was strange, but we received a direct relay response. The message was rejected.”

Eli stared at Jood. He could have told him that he’d found sea rats in the engine room and it would have come as less of a shock. “Why?” Eli sputtered.

“No reason given.”

Eli shook his head. “That—that can’t happen.”

He knew, of course, that it could. Here was the proof, in fact. But he’d never heard of it happening. Bad headers, misformatted sends, insufficient funds. Those were reasons to reject. But no reason given?

Eli sat back. It slowly dawned on him that this was good news. It was very good news. He’d managed to look like he cared enough to try to warn Earth—when he didn’t—while at the same time, he got to keep his credits. Win-win.

“Well, we tried,” Eli said apologetically to Quinn. To Jood he said, “Transfer the credits back to the ship pool. I’m sure we’ll find another use for them.”

Waylon guffawed aloud this time. River concentrated even harder on her console.

He looked back at Jood, whose face was as expressionless as ever. “What am I missing?”

“There was no refund,” Jood said.

Eli blinked. “What?”

“It seems the Backbone considered it a good send, but somewhere along the line we got a bad send response. Very curious,” Jood said, as if it was a natural phenomenon worthy of further study.

Eli felt his grip tighten on the command chair until his knuckles went white. “They didn’t refund?” he stammered.

Waylon finally couldn’t hold it in. He broke into loud laughter. When he caught his breath, he said, “So long, credits,” and made a butterfly shape with his hands as he moved them up toward the ceiling. “It was nice knowing you.” He slapped his knee.

Eli felt like he’d been punched in the gut. No, scratch that. He felt like he’d been kicked in his manhood. Repeatedly.

His beautiful daughter picked that moment to speak up. “We still have to warn Earth, Dad.”

Eli felt a wave of fury roll over him that he had to tamp down. “With what? I’m completely broke. Your credits are only good on Earth. How do we get them a message? Do you want to just fly over to Earth and drop it off?” he asked sarcastically.

His daughter nodded vigorously. “Yes, exactly.”

Oh god, he realized. That’s actually what she wants to do. She actually expects us to go to Earth.

“We aren’t going to Earth,” Eli said, clearly enunciating each word.

“We have to,” Quinn said.

Eli could suddenly feel tension descend over the cockpit. He glanced around to find River and Waylon eyeing him expectantly. Tim and Quinn, too. Only Jood was blissfully unaware.

“We nearly lost our asses against those things,” Eli said firmly. “And only a handful of them came after us last time. We’re *not* going anywhere near ‘em.”

Tim rolled his eyes to the ceiling. “You didn’t think he’d go for that, did you?”

Quinn ignored him and addressed Eli alone. “What about the people of Earth? We can’t leave the planet undefended. Those things will overrun the Squadrons if they attack Earth without some advance warning. I shouldn’t even have to explain this to you.”

Waylon guffawed with laughter. “Will you wake up, little girl? Open your eyes and look around you. This ship ain’t defending anyone or anything. We’re a speed scout. That’s it. We don’t have the firepower to fight even one of those things, let alone a whole fleet of ‘em.”

Quinn rounded on him. “You wouldn’t have to fight them. All you’d have to do is get ahead of them and warn the Squadrons that a force is advancing on Earth. That on its own could tip the advantage toward Earth.”

“Did you miss the part where they can match us for speed?” Waylon asked. “Even if we wanted to run them down, there’s no way we can catch them now. They have a huge head start.”

Jood looked up from his console and said, “Actually, it’s very likely that we can outrun them.”

All eyes turned to him.

“How?” River said. “They overtook us before, and I had our engines going all-out. They’re at least as fast as the *Boomerang*.”

“Over short distances, yes,” Jood said. “But their size suggests that they won’t be able to make a trip of that duration without stopping for refueling. And their path from the point where we initially encountered them suggested a gravity assist, which further reinforces the idea that they’ll need multiple stopovers.”

“See? We have to try,” Quinn said.

“This is stupid,” Waylon said shortly. “We’d have to fight them to get in front of them. How do you propose we punch through their ranks without them seeing us and blowing us to kingdom come?”

“You’re all cowards,” Tim muttered. “You pretend to be big and bad, but you’re all chickenshit under the surface.”

“You’re one to talk,” Waylon snarled.

Tim reflexively leaned away from him.

Quinn leaned closer to Eli. “Come on, Dad. You know it’s the right thing to do. I know you don’t like the chain of command, but the *Boomerang* is your ship. You can still do the right thing and warn Earth.”

“You go do the right thing and warn Earth,” Waylon interjected. “Go on. Go out there and stick out your thumb. See how far you get.”

“Don’t listen to her, Sarge,” River chimed in. “You’d be throwing away the *Boomerang* and all our lives, doing something like that.”

Just then, Jood looked up from his console. “We’re ready to fly.”

Eli leaned back in his chair and fixed his eyes on his daughter. “Lift off, Lieutenant Bryce.”

Her glowing face fell before his eyes. Eli didn’t expect her to like his decision; he just wasn’t expecting her disappointment to affect him like this. He hated to hurt her feelings, but more than that, he hated to confirm Tim’s worst assumptions about him.

She turned to present her back to him and bent over the pilot’s station. Her hands followed the usual routine. The starboard tender fired up, and the *Boomerang* quivered off the ground.

Eli turned his attention elsewhere. He couldn’t think about Quinn and her feelings anymore. “Scan the atmosphere,” he told River. “Make sure none of those things are still hanging around before we get too exposed.”

River frowned at her controls. “The atmosphere is all clear. It’s just....” The console gave a beep, followed by another.

“What’s the problem?” Eli asked.

“I’m picking up a life sign on the other side of the moon.”

“A life sign?” Eli repeated, sure he’d heard wrong.

River’s head shot up. “It’s human.”

TEN

TIM SPUN AROUND. “That’s impossible. How could a human be all the way out here?”

“You’re human,” Jood pointed out. “And you’re here.”

“It’s fluctuating,” River reported. “The heartbeat is unstable.”

“Divert to pick it up,” Tim ordered.

River raised her eyebrows at him. “Excuse me? You don’t give orders on this ship.”

“If someone is alive and injured out here, you can’t just fly off and leave them to die,” Tim said.

“Sure we can,” Waylon said. “Besides, it’s a trap.”

“You’re just paranoid,” Tim said.

“Better to be paranoid than dead,” Eli muttered.

Tim looked apoplectic. “Do you really think someone is down there faking an unstable human heartbeat just to get us to land?”

Waylon ran his tongue over his teeth. “That’s what a trap is, Doc.”

Eli turned to River. “Why didn’t we spot it before?”

River shrugged. “I wasn’t exactly bothering with full scans the first time we took off from this rock, if you’ll recall.”

“It probably has something to do with those bug ship things,” Waylon said.

“All the more reason to go down there,” Tim said. He turned to Eli. “Not even you could do something as low as turn your back on a stranded person in need. You have to at least try to help them.”

Eli wanted to tell him that he didn’t have to try to do anything. It might be breaking some Squadrons rule to leave this human out here, but this

wasn't a Squadrons ship. Would anyone blame him for flying away after what they'd been through?

Then he thought about Tim's words earlier. *I don't kill people.* And Eli's own response to that. *I guess that makes one of us.*

He sensed his daughter watching him. Was he really the bastard that Tim made him out to be? Was there even a chance Eli could be the person his daughter thought he was?

Eli took a deep breath. "Nothing else out there, River?"

"Clear," she said. "None of those damn ships."

Eli nodded at Quinn. "Fly us over there. Whoever it is, he's probably dead already."

The *Boomerang* banked at a dangerous angle and shot off across the barren landscape. It skimmed mountains and cavernous crevices, burning up the miles. The *Boomerang* could move when she wanted to.

Over Tim's objections, Eli directed Quinn to make several passes to check the surrounding terrain and look for anything that looked suspicious. When he was satisfied, they landed.

Eli pivoted his chair around and stood. "Jood, you're in charge here. Waylon, Tim, let's go check out this signal."

Tim jumped up and headed for the galley to grab his medical kit. Waylon and Eli headed straight for the aft ramp.

"This is a crock of bull," Waylon spat as Eli lowered the ramp a short time later. "And where the hell is that bastard? He's the goddamn reason we're here."

"I'm here," Tim said caustically as he arrived with a huge medical kit that was almost as tall as he was. "Let's go."

"Damn, you gonna bring it back in that thing?" Waylon said.

"If I have to," Tim snapped. "Now let's move."

Before the ramp had even hit the rocky surface, Tim had jumped off the end and started moving in the direction of the signal, lugging the huge medical kit with him.

"Slow up, Doc," Eli said. Even with the awkward kit, the doctor was hustling ahead. "I want a perimeter sweep."

"Don't be ridiculous," Tim said without slowing.

Waylon chuckled. "I can shoot him right now in the back," he said. "Make it look like an accident."

“How are you going to make shooting him in the back look like an accident?”

Waylon shrugged. He pointed his laser pistol at Tim’s receding form. “Oops.”

“Clever,” Eli said.

Tim rushed over a slight ridge and they could only see the top of his head. His voice crackled over the radio. “It’s a female. What a mess!”

Eli and Waylon warily approached. “Look at how the ridge forms a perfect depression here,” Eli said.

“If I wanted to start trouble, this is where I’d do it,” Waylon said, slipping over the ridge and keeping his eyes on the lip around them as he approached Tim. “Hey sawbones, let’s hurry the hell—Damn.”

Waylon was staring down at Tim, who was on his knees.

Eli followed, still watching the ridge, then came up short when he arrived next to Waylon.

Blood was everywhere. The woman was lying in a pool of it. She was facedown with wet hair matted to her head. He could see huge gashes in her skull where something had hit her repeatedly. Eli followed a trail of blood up and over the ridge on the opposite side from where they’d entered it. She’d crawled here.

“I have to take her back aboard,” Tim said. “I have to resuscitate.”

“This is crazy,” Waylon said. “She’s dead.”

Tim snapped his head around. “She’s alive. And we’re taking her back to the ship.”

Waylon turned to Eli. “This is bullshit. She’s not going to live.” He’d stepped forward to block Tim’s path back to the ship.

Tim swiveled around. “Get out of my way, you damn asshole! This is a medical emergency.”

Eli didn’t necessarily disagree with either man. As much as he hated Tim, if the woman could be saved they should do it at this point. They’d come this far. On the other hand, he couldn’t disagree with Waylon. The woman looked dead.

“Can’t you stabilize her here?” Eli asked. “Then we can see—”

He froze. He watched a red dot slide across the ground and settle on the bloody broken body of the woman. Then a second dot joined it. Then they both worked their way up the body and settled on Tim, who was completely oblivious.

Eli glanced at Waylon who was already beginning to crouch and point his pistol at the top of the ridge.

Now Eli saw them. Two tiny metallic stumps with red eyes.

They were killbots, or some version of them. The Squadrons loved to use them everywhere they went. They were too small to see from above and their energy signature was too low to register on scans, so the *Boomerang's* flyovers did no good. The tiny rovers with their caterpillar treads were perfect for this terrain, just as their high-intensity lasers were perfect for slicing up human skin.

Eli was suddenly very cognizant of the fact that the rover 'stumps,' as the mounted lasers were known, had popped up on the side of the ridge where the bloody trail of the woman led. He had a good idea what gave her all those injuries.

Tim looked at Eli expectantly, waiting for him to finish his thought.

"Hey, smartass," Waylon said calmly.

"What?" Tim snapped.

"Duck!" he screamed as he fired at the ridge.

ELEVEN

WAYLON'S SHOT hit the first stump right between the red dots. Sparks flew from the top of it as it fell backward like a target at some old-fashioned shooting gallery.

The second one swiveled to target Waylon, but before it could fire, Eli had his own pistol out. He fired from the hip and missed, hitting the rocky lip right in front of it. But he did just enough to jostle it and put it off its shot. A thick ray of energy ripped into the dirt at Waylon's feet, scorching it black and sending him diving clear.

Eli's second shot was true and he watched as the stump blew open in sparks and fell backwards.

"Move, Tim, damn you, move!" Eli screamed.

Tim had spun around and looked stupidly back up to the ridge, but he stubbornly refused to budge from the woman's side.

Eli rushed forward and tackled Tim to the ground just as a third stump appeared on the edge of the ridge.

He felt the heat blast over his shoulder as a dark hole opened up in the dirt just where Tim had been crouching over the woman.

Out of the corner of his eye, Eli saw the stump explode as Waylon expertly came out of his roll and tagged it with a single shot.

"There are more coming!" Waylon shouted.

At the same time, the first two came rushing up to the ridge, their treads up in the air for a moment, before they slid over the ridge and started down the other side toward them. Eli had no idea what they had planned with their mounted lasers destroyed. Maybe they had some other weapon Eli didn't know about? Or maybe they were just going to run them over? He

wasn't waiting around to find out. He yanked Tim to his feet and started dragging him away.

"Let's go!"

"Wait!" he shouted back.

Eli looked at him like he was insane. "What the hell are you—"

Tim elbowed Eli right in the throat.

Eli dropped him and staggered back, hands to his throat, trying to breathe.

Tim spun around and ran back to the woman. He swooped her up in his arms, blood splattering up all over him. At that moment, Eli saw yet another of the stumps appear over the ridge directly across from Tim.

Tim must have seen it too, because he started to back up slowly.

A red dot raced across the rocky ground toward Tim. He spun around.

He stopped short when he found Eli pointing his pistol right at his face. A look of sheer terror descended over Tim's features as Eli allowed himself a tight smile and pulled the trigger.

His shot flew right over Tim's shoulder and hit the stump dead center just as it tried to fire. It fell backward, sending a wild laser shot harmlessly up in the sky.

Waylon shot another that popped up. "This is fun and all," he said, "But we can't keep this up!"

Just then, the air above Eli rippled and he felt warm energy tickle the back of his neck. He turned to see the *Boomerang* hovering right over them, the main ramp still down.

The far side of the ridge exploded as the *Boomerang* fired one of her lasers.

Truth be told, he would have preferred for the shot to be aimed a bit farther down the ridge so they weren't covered in rock and dirt from the blast, but when your ship shows up to save your ass, beggars can't be choosers.

"You guys need a ride?" River's voice crackled in Eli's earpiece.

"I love you, River," Waylon shouted as he bounded onto the ramp then turned around and scanned for more of the killbots. "You know that right?"

Eli raced up after Waylon, then turned around and covered for Tim who ran up the ramp last with the bloody body held tight in both arms.

"Go, River!" Eli shouted as soon as Tim was in.

The *Boomerang* rapidly ascended as Eli and Waylon rode the ramp back up into the floor of the ship. By the time it sealed, Tim was already out of sight, headed for the galley.

“Go help him,” Eli said to Waylon.

He grumbled about a “dead body for scrap” but he sprinted ahead.

In the galley, Tim stooped over the table where the crew had just finished eating breakfast. Blood saturated his shirt sleeves up to the shoulder. He floundered in gore, fighting with an invisible enemy. Waylon’s bulk and Jood’s thinner frame blocked Eli’s view of what they were doing.

“Hold it!” Tim bellowed. “Tighten that clamp! Tighter! Good. Give me that paddle, Jood. God damn it! Now! Yes!”

Eli observed the doctor working over something unseen and terrible. For a moment, he admired the black determination distorting the young man’s features. Eli had never seen him so bent on anything.

The next minute, Tim straightened up. His shoulders slumped and his blood-saturated arms dropped to his sides. “That’s the best we can do. We got the bleeding stopped, and her heart rate is stable.” He shot a sidelong glance at the other two. “Thanks. You both did great.”

Jood turned away with his usual flat tone. “We have three units of universal blood in storage, Doctor. I suggest we start the infusion now. Her volume is too low to sustain her current oxygen demand.”

Tim nodded. “Go ahead and start it.”

Waylon wrinkled his nose at the table. “Whoever left her here did their work, that’s for sure.” He looked up and saw Eli standing there. “Tell me we’re not gonna make this into another distraction.”

“No, we’re not.”

Before Eli could say more, Quinn spoke up behind him. “Thank you, Dad. You did the right thing picking up that stranger.”

He turned to face her, adrenaline still coursing through his veins. “If you want to be on this ship, you conduct yourself as my pilot, not my conscience. I’m not here to do ‘the right thing’, and neither are you—and that goes for your boyfriend, too.”

She burst out laughing. “Come on, Dad. I can’t do that. I’m a pilot in the Squadrons. I’m not one of your crew.”

“Then get the hell off my ship!” he thundered. “You’re one of my crew and acting accordingly, or you’re not. There is no in-between. If you’re a

pilot in the Squadrons, then you don't have any business here. Go back to Earth where you belong!"

Quinn looked crestfallen. Eli instantly regretted his outburst. But not his words. Nothing was more dangerous than a conscience out here.

He closed his eyes and took a moment to compose himself. "Please go back to your station and lay in a course for Epsilon Outpost," he said evenly. "Let me know when we're in communications range."

Quinn's eyes grew big. "But what about those things headed for Earth? Your message didn't—"

"We'll tell Epsilon about it and leave it to them. I'm tired of spending my time and money to worry about Earth." Eli didn't give her a chance to talk back. "Do you have a problem with that, Lieutenant?"

He waited only long enough to see Quinn shut her mouth with a click as her countenance went blank. She was too much of a soldier not to obey a direct order. He walked off to his quarters and shut the door before he dialed the combination into his wall safe.

The metal case sat inside, exactly where he'd left it. As long as he still had that and the *Boomerang*, he could pull their asses out of the fire.

TWELVE

17 Hours Until Annihilation

RIVER CLOMPED INTO THE GALLEY. “We’re clear of the Gamma Belt.”

Waylon covered his eyes. “Thank heaven for that.”

Eli pointed at the stranger sprawled on the table. “Revive her.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” Tim said. “She’s still weak from...”

“Understood,” Eli said. “Revive her.”

Tim bit his lip and bent over the stranger.

The *Boomerang* didn’t have much in the way of medical facilities, but it seemed that Tim brought a considerable amount of expertise with him. In the four hours since she’d come on board, Tim had managed the minor miracle of making the woman look halfway normal—nothing like the half-dead rag that she’d come in looking like.

The only other explanation was that the woman wasn’t as bad off as she’d appeared when they had first encountered her. Eli didn’t believe that for a second. When it came to his area of expertise, Tim was, well, an expert. It galled Eli to admit that.

Curly brown hair hovered around the woman’s head in a short, bouncy bob. Clear smooth skin spread over strong, distinct cheekbones. She was

still pale, but Eli could easily imagine her flushed with vibrant life. Her lips curved in a nice shape.

Tim pressed his SubQ injector to the stranger's neck and pulled the trigger. He barely stepped away before she rocketed off the table, sitting bolt upright. She gasped for breath and her eyes shot open. She screamed and stared all around her, not seeing anything.

Tim moved in and laid his hand on her arm. "You're okay. You're on board the scout vessel *Boomerang*. You're safe. No one will hurt you."

The stranger's gaze skipped from one face to the next. Her lips moved, but no sound came out.

Tim put his injector away. "Can you tell us your name? Do you know why you were dumped in the Gamma Belt?"

"That's obvious, isn't it?" Waylon offered. "Someone wanted her to die there. Stupid question."

"Will you shut it?" Tim snapped over his shoulder. "I wasn't talking to you."

Eli stepped between the two men. He positioned his body to separate them from each other, and concentrated his attention on the stranger. "I'm Eli Bryce. You're on board my ship. Who are you?"

Her deep brown eyes met his. She blinked. She really was pretty, in a feminine sort of way. For a moment, she looked like an open book, emotion written across her face. But in the next instant, her face closed up like a box. She erected a barricade against him and compressed her lips. Her eyes went blank. She shifted her gaze an inch away to look over his shoulder.

Eli snorted and shook his head. Of course she wouldn't appreciate being saved from certain death. Of course the next person who set foot on this ship would throw the slightest attempt at compassion back in his face.

He rounded on River. "What's the closest system?"

River thought for a second. "Regulus is right on our way."

"Perfect. There's a frontier station there. Alter course to stop by Regulus Delta," Eli said.

Quinn rushed into the galley to block his path. "You can't abandon her there! No one would ever find her."

"You're exaggerating," Eli said. *Although probably not by much*, he thought. "Besides, ask her if she cares. See what she says."

"Regulus Delta is an *automated* station," Tim said. "It could be years before someone arrives."

“They’re designed for these kinds of situations,” Eli said. “She’ll have plenty of water and nutrient supplements while she waits.”

Quinn cast a glance at the stranger, who sat bolt upright and stared straight ahead like a prisoner of war. Quinn whirled around and laid her hand on Eli’s chest to stop him from walking out of the room. “Please, Dad. At least take her to Epsilon, where she can arrange transport somewhere else. It’ll take you longer to dump her somewhere than just keep going!”

Technically that was true, but he wanted this unappreciative castaway off his ship as soon as possible. “We’re not running a shuttle service for strays.”

Waylon spoke up from across the table. “Besides, she won’t be able to arrange transport. She has no way to pay for it. I say we drop her off and be done with it.”

Tim chopped his hand through the air angrily. “Why don’t you save fuel and shoot her right now and be done with it?”

“Fair point,” Waylon said.

“Savages,” Tim said, shaking his head.

“Please, Dad,” Quinn repeated, her voice softer. “Just take her to Epsilon Outpost. Is that asking too much?”

Eli glanced up and caught Waylon watching him. The big man wore an incredulous sneer like he couldn’t believe Eli was falling for this nonsense.

Very deliberately, Eli looked down at Quinn. “Yes,” he said. “It is too much to ask.”

Without another word, Eli stepped around his daughter and headed for the door. He could hear Tim spluttering something behind him. Eli could picture the doctor’s pinched face, full of fury, and it brought a smile to his own.

He’d just put his foot across the threshold when a piercing scream shattered his mind.

THIRTEEN

ELI WHIPPED around to witness a scene of indescribable chaos tearing the galley apart. Quinn staggered backward and hit the wall. She clasped her head in both hands, screaming in agony. She writhed back and forth and blood dripped from her nose.

The stranger slammed down flat on the table, convulsing in spasms. Her arms locked at her sides, and her legs kicked and trembled out of control. Her eyes rolled up in their sockets, and blood-tinged foam boiled between her clenched teeth.

Tim dove for her. He grabbed her by the shoulders, but the minute he touched her, an invisible force hurled him back. He smashed into the kitchen counter. His head snapped back and smacked the post holding up the cupboards. His skull left a blood splotch behind him and he flopped to the floor, senseless.

Jood dove for the SubQ injector. He flipped open Tim's medkit and seized an ampoule of something. He crammed it into the gun, but when he tried to approach the stranger, her eyes snapped open. She aimed a kick at Jood and hit him in the chest. He stumbled back and almost lost his hold on the injector.

Eli didn't hesitate. He rushed the table at the same instant that Jood and Waylon moved in from the other side. Eli tackled the woman and pinned her under his weight. He jammed his elbow into her sternum to hold her down. Jood leaned over with the injector, trying to get near her neck, but she thrashed too hard.

Waylon snarled under his breath. "Screw it! Nothing's worth this."

He spun aside and picked up a heavy iron frying pan fallen from the counter. He hefted it over the stranger, but at that second, something hit Eli. It didn't strike him from the outside. It smashed into his mind from inside. He reeled, but he didn't lose his grip on the quivering body in his hands.

He floundered to clear his thoughts, but try as he might, a torrent of jumbled images and emotions cascaded through his being. He was on Earth. He was on the lawn in front of a yellow house. A brown dog leaped up and licked his face. A woman laughed on the porch. Even in the midst of that memory, Eli knew he'd never seen that house or that dog or that woman before. These memories were coming from the stranger. They had to be.

The next instant, the picture changed. She was in a massive battle against aliens. They were Tappnians. Their insect bodies swarmed over skyscrapers and poured through city streets. They devoured hundreds of humans in their path. They consumed vehicles and gunships and battlecruisers.

Eli gasped when he recognized an onion dome in the background. They were in Russia. He was witnessing the Battle of St. Petersburg, but he was never there. It was her. *She* was there. She was in the Battle of St. Petersburg.

Before he could blink, the image changed again, and she smiled up at him as calmly and pristinely as if she was standing right in front of him. She held out her hand to him. In the vision, he raised his hand to meet hers.

The instant their fingers touched, a powerful impact hit the *Boomerang*. Eli felt it through his feet and through the table. His vision cleared, and he was back in the galley.

Voices shrieked from all sides. "We lost power!"

"What the hell happened?" Tim yelled.

"Electromagnetic pulse," Jood called back. "An EMP of some form hit the ship."

"How?" Waylon thundered. "We're in the middle of space!"

"It was her." Eli reared back. His mind cleared, and he could see everything now. The stranger lay still and unmoving on the table. Whatever had happened, it had knocked her out along with the ship. "It was her."

The engine noise that should have enlivened the *Boomerang* no longer disturbed the terrible silence. Instead, Eli distinctly made out a distant hum more deadly than any explosion. It vibrated the hull.

Everyone stood still and listened. All at once, River leaped into action. “We’re in freefall! We have to stabilize her.”

Jood bumped into Eli on their way out of the galley. “We have to restart the system.”

They raced to the cockpit. Stars wheeled out of control beyond the window. Some unknown world swung into view. Eli supported himself against the bulkhead to hold himself upright. “Where are we? Where’s the gravity coming from?”

“We’re over a planet,” River said.

“What planet?” Eli said. “We weren’t anywhere near a planet.”

“I don’t know!” River shouted back. “All I know is it’s there and we’re getting sucked into it.”

“Our momentum must have propelled us into the planet’s orbit,” Jood said.

River groped her way to the engineering console. “The routing system is offline, but it looks intact.”

“Can you reactivate it?” Eli moved toward the command console, but he stopped as Jood moved in from the other side. He let the Xynnar take over to do whatever he could. If anyone could restart the ship before they all crashed and burned, Jood could do it.

River grunted under her breath. “Damn!”

Eli didn’t ask what the problem was. The *Boomerang* swung in a wild arc, and he caught a brief glimpse of the outer rim of some gas giant. The planet zoomed closer every time the *Boomerang* tilted in that direction.

A blink flashed across the pilot’s station and died in a second. Jood sat stiff in the command chair. He didn’t appear to be moving at all, but Eli knew better. The next time the console erupted to life, Jood’s fingers flew over the panel faster than Eli could follow.

“The main boost relay is back online!” River cried.

“Bring the core into alignment,” Jood ordered.

“It won’t align!” River shrieked.

“Forget it,” Jood replied. “Switch to the auxiliary distribution pathway. It will be quicker.”

The *Boomerang* teetered one more time. The cockpit window stabilized, staring straight down into the gassy atmosphere. The milky yellow surface whizzed toward Eli at a frightening speed. “Uh, Jood...”

Jood ignored him. He bolted out of the command chair and lunged for the pilot's station. Without a word, he shoved Quinn away and dropped into her seat. She yelled out, "Hey!" but Jood paid no attention.

He seized the controls and called out, "Now, River! Fire it now."

"I'm trying!" River screamed. "It won't... There it goes."

Both engines gave a tortured shriek, and the *Boomerang* hurtled forward so fast the G force smashed Eli back into the bulkhead. River slammed into the engineering chair and Quinn fell flat on her ass. Through it all, Jood sat rigid, wrestling the ship into a dive. The *Boomerang* plunged straight down for the surface.

Bile rose in Eli's throat. The Xynnar never blinked. He never budged in his seat, except when his arms danced over the controls. The *Boomerang* whistled out of the sky, pointing her nose at the surface catapulting into view. It filled the whole window. It blocked out the stars. At that moment, the ship veered and zoomed parallel to the surface. It left a vapor trail burning in its wake, and rocketed upward into the clear black night.

FOURTEEN

THE CREW of the *Boomerang* stood in a loose circle around the cockpit—all except Jood, who remained seated in the pilot's chair.

"Get rid of her," Waylon grumbled. "Eject her into deep space before she kills us all."

"I won't allow that," Tim interjected. "No one is going to kill her while I'm around."

"Then we'll eject *you* into deep space along with her." Waylon glanced at Eli. "We've put up with way too much from him as it is."

"We won't survive another hit like that," River pointed out. "One more outburst like that and we're all dead."

"We don't know anything about her," Quinn chimed in. "We have no idea why she was left on that moon."

"What difference does it make why she was left?" River asked. "She's trouble, either way."

"Maybe she was left for nearly destroying whatever vessel brought her here," Waylon suggested. "Did you ever think of that? Hell, she could have left a string of destroyed ships from here to the Seclusion Range."

Eli turned to Jood. "How far are we from Epsilon Outpost now?"

"Five parsecs," he said calmly. "We were shifted from our previous course."

"Hot damn," Waylon whistled. "They were closer than when they'd started all this."

"She must have thrown us here. The planet we almost slammed into was Sonian-18." Jood checked the console. "The electromagnetic event wiped the log. It is difficult to tell exactly how or when she did it."

Eli tried to focus his thoughts. Regulus was out. It looked like Quinn was getting her wish after all. It really was pointless to go anywhere but Epsilon now. “That settles it, then. Finish the repairs and lay in a course for the Outpost. We’ll drop off the passenger when we collect payment,” he said.

Eli turned to Tim. “Keep her sedated until we get there. Can you handle that?”

Tim crossed his arms and gave Eli a withering stare. As he turned to leave the cockpit, Quinn got up to join him.

Eli watched the two of them go, then excused himself and stepped out onto the gangway after them. “Maybe I should drop you two off at the Outpost. You can book passage back to Earth from there.”

Quinn and Tim shared a glance. There was plenty in that glance. From Eli’s vantage point, it seemed like Tim agreed with Eli. Maybe they’d already talked about it. Tim had made it abundantly clear that he thought it was pointless for Quinn to be out here. She was the hardheaded one.

Tim murmured something and Quinn gave a curt reply, then he gave Eli a sour look as he continued down the gangway toward the galley.

“I don’t get it, Dad,” Quinn said when he was out of earshot. “Why are you holding such a grudge against Earth? It’s been so long.”

“You’re forgetting,” Eli interrupted. “The Judge Advocate banished me from Earth. I’d get arrested the instant I landed there.”

“You could get that reversed. You know you could.”

Not after I kill your boyfriend, Eli thought. But he kept that snarky response to himself.

“Why can’t you just put the past behind you and try?” she continued. “There are a lot of good people on Earth...like me. You don’t have to stay out here being...” She waved up and down in front of him. “Being this.”

Eli cocked his head to study her. How many times in the last twenty-five years had he asked himself that question? “Earth went one direction, and I went the other. This is who I am. You just don’t want to see it.”

Quinn sighed. They walked in silence for a moment. “Maybe you’re right.”

Eli studied Quinn’s face. “There’s something new. What am I right about, exactly?”

Quinn smiled. “About me and Tim going back to the Squadrons. The Squadrons make sense to us. We’re both comfortable in that world. We

were never going to be comfortable here. We belong on Earth.” She seemed to make up her mind. “When we get to the Epsilon Outpost, we’ll disembark and make our way back home.”

After all his fuming against her and telling her to leave, this caught him off-guard. He didn’t know what to say. She turned her blue eyes up to him and smiled. She squeezed his arm. “I love you, Dad.”

As they parted ways, Eli knew something had changed. Something fundamental. Something that left a sick feeling in the pit of his stomach.

She’d given up on him.

Eli stood alone for several seconds, listening to her footsteps as she walked away.

Finally, he turned and made his way back into the cockpit. He relieved Waylon and spent a good hour with Jood and River working through the repairs which weren’t as bad as he’d feared. When Waylon returned, they were underway again.

Eli found himself heading down to the galley to check on their castaway.

Quinn stood near the table where the stranger sat up, fully alert. She nodded at Eli when he walked in. “That’s my dad,” she told the stranger. “He pretends to be a grizzly old bear, but he’s really a softy underneath all that bluster.”

“He is *not* a softy underneath it all,” Tim countered. “It’s the other way around. He pretends to be a Boy Scout done wrong by the Squadrons, but he’s really a—”

“Aren’t you supposed to be keeping her sedated,” Eli said. “Was that too much to ask?”

“The Squadrons?” the stranger breathed up at Eli, and her eyes widened. “You were in the Squadrons?”

“That was a long time ago,” Eli said.

“Have you ever heard of the *Devilfish* disaster?” Tim asked. “That was him.”

A curious silence descended over the galley. The stranger’s clear, amber-brown eyes gleamed up at Eli with unearthly brilliance. She didn’t blink once. Her voice murmured low and strained. “I’ve heard of it.”

“Well, he isn’t in the Squadrons now,” Tim went on. “The fact that he’s taking us to a place like Epsilon Outpost tells you what he’s all about. But you won’t be stuck there. We’re getting off at the Outpost, too, and we’re

actual Squadron officers. We're going back to Earth. We'll take you with us. You have nothing to worry about."

The stranger snapped out of her unwavering stare at Eli. "You guys are in the Squadrons, too?"

"I'm a pilot," Quinn said. "And Tim's a doctor as you already know. We'll make sure you get back to Earth all right."

Another tense silence followed. The stranger slowly shook her head.

"What's wrong?" Tim asked. "Don't you want to go back to Earth?"

The woman perched on the edge of the table. She glanced at their faces before she came back to drilling Eli with that eerie stare. He got the distinct impression she was trying to tell him something with her eyes. "Have you ever heard of Camp Utopia?"

Tim furrowed his brow. "That's a Special Forces training installation—at least, it used to be. The Mysterium destroyed it when they attacked Earth five years ago. They wiped out thousands of special operatives, and the camp was never rebuilt. Why?"

The woman crossed her arms. "Because that's the reason I'm not going back to Earth."

FIFTEEN

QUINN BLINKED. “I DON’T UNDERSTAND.”

The woman hopped off the table. “Your dad isn’t the only one who doesn’t think the Squadrons is such a great organization. I was in the Squadrons for fifteen years. I think I know what it’s all about, and I’m not going back.”

“What happened?” Tim asked. “What went wrong?”

She ignored him and headed across the galley and started messing with some clothes hanging against the lockers.

Quinn regarded her from behind. “Were you at Camp Utopia? Is that it? Did you get injured or...traumatized?”

“You just don’t get it, do you? You think the Squadrons is so great. Bully for you, but I know better. I was at Camp Utopia and the Battle of St. Petersburg and a couple dozen other hotspots. I’ve seen it all. Hell, I’ve probably seen more combat than everyone on this ship put together, and no one is going to tell me what a great organization the Squadrons is. That’s bullshit.” She went to another locker and yanked out a med kit. Eli couldn’t see what she was doing. “Where’s that SubQ you had earlier?”

No one budged. They didn’t seem to blink, staring at her. Quinn spoke in a tiny voice. “Are you mad because they brought you out here? Is that how you wound up on that moon—with the Squadrons?”

The woman wheeled around baring her teeth. “Do you know Admiral James Quincy Wescott? If you’re in the Squadrons, you must know him.”

Tim glanced toward Eli and scowled. “He’s the admiral in charge of Strategic Oversight Command. He was the Judge Advocate who ruled against Eli in the *Devilfish* disaster.”

“Strategic Oversight!” The woman snorted. “That’s a little piece of propaganda that says he can do whatever he wants. He was in charge of Camp Utopia when the Mysterium invaded. He deliberately dismantled the camp’s security system to leave it vulnerable to attack. He wanted the Mysterium to destroy the camp so he could test out experimental tactical enhancements he was rolling out on the operatives.”

Tim’s jaw dropped. “That’s impossible. He wouldn’t do that.”

The woman bent over the med kit. “You can look it up. It’s all in the records.” She waved behind her without looking at them. “Look up *my* records. My name is Yasha Aliyevah. You’ll find out I was at Camp Utopia during the attack.”

Tim and Quinn glanced at each other again. Other than that, neither of them moved.

“While you’re at it, look up the transport manifest of the Squadron R-class cruiser *Manatee*. It left Rio de Janeiro on the fifteenth of March last year, carrying five crew and eight passengers. One of them was Admiral Wescott.”

Tim shuddered and ran his hand across his eyes. “I don’t want to hear this.”

He wheeled to walk away, but Yasha strode after him. She got right up close behind him and barked into his ear. “Of course you want to hear this, Doctor. You want to know how I got on that moon and why I don’t want to go back to Earth? Now you’re gonna find out. There were eight passengers on that transport: Admiral Wescott, two staff sergeants, and five unranked Squadron officers. Why do you think they weren’t ranked? Turns out they were the five operatives who survived the attack on Camp Utopia. They were the only five who lived to tell what Admiral Wescott was really doing at the camp when the Mysterium attacked.” She counted off on her fingers. “There was Nick Farruko, Amir Sulemani, Regan Everette, Ross Pickeringham, and me. Admiral Wescott transported all five of us out here on a classified mission for the Strategic Oversight branch of Squadrons Command. He’s the one who brought me here.”

Tim muttered something under his breath and charged out of the galley, or tried to. Eli blocked his path.

“Those killbots,” Eli said.

Tim was thrown off balance. “What about them?”

Yasha looked confused as well. “What killbots?”

“The ones that were sitting there waiting for us when we picked you up.” Eli didn’t take his eyes off Tim. “I thought they were *like* the ones that the Squadrons use. Obviously, I haven’t seen the real thing in decades. Neither has Waylon. But you have.”

Tim suddenly looked pale. “So?”

“So were they *like* Squadron killbots,” Eli said quietly. “Or were they Squadron killbots?”

Tim’s nostrils flared and he shoved his way past Eli and out of the galley.

“I think that answers my question.”

Yasha looked angry. “Those sons of bitches.”

She pivoted to glare at Quinn like she expected her to react like Tim, but she only blinked at Yasha with that big-eyed, innocent wonder. “What’s the matter with you? Aren’t you going to go after him? Aren’t you going to tell me it’s impossible for a decorated admiral to do something like that? Aren’t you going to tell me the Squadrons are too honorable and virtuous to treat their people like that?”

Yasha stood a good foot taller than Quinn. Her flinty expression and chiseled frame didn’t look right next to Quinn’s petite form. She pinched her lips together. “Well? Aren’t you going to look up the records to see if I’m telling the truth?”

Quinn’s shoulders relaxed. “I believe you.”

Yasha stiffened. “You shouldn’t. You would be making a mistake to trust me.”

“I didn’t say I trust you. I said I believe you. You couldn’t cause that ... that ... *pulse* if there wasn’t something different about you. You attacked me with some kind of psychic fugue when you were unconscious. You wouldn’t tell us to check the records if you weren’t sure we would confirm what you said.”

“Yeah, well.” Yasha spun away and marched back to the locker. She muttered over her shoulder with her back to Quinn. “You can leave me at Epsilon Outpost, ‘cuz I ain’t getting anywhere near Earth—not in this lifetime.”

SIXTEEN

TWO HOURS LATER, the intercom in Eli's cabin crackled to life. "We will arrive at the Epsilon Outpost in twenty minutes," Jood announced.

"Dock us at the usual spot," Eli said.

"One other issue," Jood said. "The Outpost is undergoing repairs on her transport platforms and has informed us that all outbound traffic is going through the orbital docking station."

"Okaaay," Eli said, not sure why he cared about this information. Epsilon Outpost was sprawling and always had construction going on somewhere.

"For the purposes of our passenger," Jood explained. "I thought—"

Eli let out a frustrated growl. "Damn it, right." It figures. The universe did have it out for him sometimes. Rather than just kicking everybody out when they landed, now they'd have to make one last trip to orbit. "Remind me Jood, how long is that trip to the docking station?"

"Seven minutes."

Eli rubbed his face. "OK, I guess we can survive a whole seven extra minutes with our guest."

"One would hope so."

Eli sighed. "I'll stop by the galley first and tell everyone the good news."

Truth be told, he'd had some time to think now and he had a couple more questions for their passenger.

Yasha stiffened when Eli walked in. Quinn straddled a bench across the room, peering into one of the lockers with her back to Yasha. She didn't see Eli come in and continued with what she was saying. "I'm just saying that

maybe with practice, you would be able to control it. I understand you don't want to use it as a weapon, but maybe you could at least get it somewhat in hand so you weren't blasting ships apart all the time."

Yasha didn't hear her. She stared up at Eli and her eyes sparkled. Eli halted in front of her. Those eyes hypnotized him, but he hadn't come here to admire them.

Quinn looked up and saw him. She hopped to her feet. "Hey, Dad, I was just going to come talk to you about Yasha here. I was thinking you could..."

Eli kept his attention on Yasha. "You formed a psychic connection with me before you detonated that electromagnetic pulse that nearly destroyed this ship. You don't remember that, do you? You transmitted some of your memories to me in a psychic link."

Yasha opened and shut her mouth a few times before she swallowed. She didn't break his gaze. "I...I don't remember any of that."

"Do you remember what happened right before you were left on the moon?"

Yasha's eyes skated to one side before she came back to riveting Eli with her impossibly clear eyes. "No. Not really."

"Did anything like that EMP happen to you on Earth? Is this the enhancement Admiral Wescott was developing?"

She gawped her mouth, still staring up at him. "I...I don't know."

He pulled himself together and remembered why he was here. "We're landing at Epsilon Outpost shortly, but you'll have to wait a little longer. Once we finish our business, we'll make a short jump up to the orbital docking station. You'll disembark there to catch transports."

Yasha nodded. "I understand. I appreciate you bringing me this far."

"Dad!" Quinn burst out. "Just listen to me for a second."

Eli turned to Quinn. "Same goes for you and Tim. Orbital docking station is the end of the line. You'll have your pick of the Earth-bound lines."

Eli turned on his heel and headed for the cockpit. Quinn followed. "Wait a second, Dad! Don't leave her here. I know you want me and Tim off your ship, and we're going, but just listen to me."

Eli slowed until she caught up. "I'm listening. Say what you have to say."

He waited. Quinn floundered for a moment while she chose her words. “Just listen to me, Dad. Yasha can release an EMP that knocks out electronics and shut down the *Boomerang*’s tenders. She could do the same thing to those things that are heading for Earth. You could take her to the horde and set off an EMP to deactivate them. You could save Earth. You could be a hero. You could...”

Eli raised one eyebrow. “How, exactly? How exactly would I release an EMP? We have no way of controlling Yasha’s power. She could set off an EMP on the way there and destroy the *Boomerang*. Then what? Then we would all be dead and Earth would be just as screwed. She’s dangerous. You just heard her. She’s grateful to be getting off at the Outpost. We’re not taking her anywhere. She’s on her own.”

“Please, Dad. You can’t be so far gone that you actually want Earth destroyed.”

“You take her to Earth,” Eli said over his shoulder as he headed down the gangway. “You and Tim are going back there. Take her with you.”

“We can’t, Dad.”

“Of course you can’t, because she said she isn’t going anywhere near Earth.”

“We can’t take her because there isn’t another ship in this sector as fast as the *Boomerang*. Those things are halfway to Earth already. Jood said we’d need a fast scout vessel built for speed to get in front of them.”

“Then I guess Earth is finished,” he said. “As it is, she won’t agree to it. She’s not a bomb you can just detonate anywhere you want. She’s a person with her own ideas about what she wants to do. Did it ever cross your mind that she probably wants a life of her own? I don’t blame her.”

Quinn halted when they reached the threshold of the cockpit. “She would listen to you, Dad. You’re the one person on board who can relate to her. You could convince her to go back.”

“Why would I want to do that? It’s a suicide mission,” he said as he ducked into the cockpit and turned around. “Look. We’re about to put in at Epsilon Outpost. I’ve got business to take care of. If all goes well, I’ll be in a position to send another message to Earth. In the meantime, I’ll have enough problems here without looking for more. Trust me. These things never go smoothly.”

TWO HOURS LATER, Eli stood at the base of the *Boomerang's* landing ramp in near shock.

For once, everything had gone right. No fights. No shootouts. A legit buyer and a fast transaction. Hell, he'd even contacted Jood to send another message through the Backbone to Earth. They could more than afford it now.

For all that had happened on this job, it looked like everything was finally going their way.

Eli glanced at Waylon, and he actually saw the man smiling. Granted, it looked warped and strange on his face, but there wasn't much to be done about that.

As they entered the aft hatchway, River hurried in, followed by Jood. "Did you get it, Sarge?"

He reached inside his jacket. He pulled out a solid block wrapped in rough paper and handed it to her. "That's yours."

Her eyes lit up, and she pressed the parcel to her nostrils. She inhaled and shut her eyes. "Mmm! It even smells fresh, you know? God, this is good stuff!"

"Don't spend it all in one place." Eli handed another brick to Jood. "Here you go, Jood. You earned it."

As he headed up to the cockpit, Eli stuck his head into the galley. Tim and Quinn were sitting at the table. Yasha was lying down by the far bulkhead. "Seven minutes and we'll have you at the orbital docking station."

He didn't wait for an acknowledgement. He was in too good a mood to let them spoil it.

"Tell me Waylon did not spend his earnings on more ammunition," Jood said as Eli slipped into the command chair.

"Believe it or not, he put every cent into the bank. I almost had a hernia."

Waylon stuck his head in. "Can we get the hell out of here now before some wayside thug decides to take our money away from us when we just got paid?"

"If we believe Eli," Jood countered, "the wayside thug would be taking *our* money away from us, not yours."

"All the same, I don't want my head shot off now that I actually turned a profit from one of these shit jobs," Waylon said.

“Waylon’s right. Let’s make ourselves scarce. I have a lead on a job over at Pi Squared Two. Don’t worry, River. You don’t have to leave orbit.”

“Good,” she said from the pilot’s station.

Eli checked the readouts. “Is everything ready to run?”

“Systems ready,” Jood reported.

Eli allowed himself a smile. A quick trip to the docking station and this would all be over.

“Take us up.”

The *Boomerang* quivered with the engines cycling up to full power. The craft wavered off its outriggers. The wide-spreading plane of the Epsilon Outpost dropped beyond the window, and the planet began to recede.

Jood shifted his hand on the engineering panel. “Diverting power from the environmental system to the atmospheric regulators. Prepare to engage the...”

“Holy hell!” Waylon said. “Hold on!”

SEVENTEEN

12 Hours Until Annihilation

A PIERCING SCREAM streaked over their heads, and several dozen of those spherical objects rocketed into view. They burned out of the atmosphere, whizzing from behind. They zoomed over the *Boomerang* and onto the same plane. They unleashed their rockets at the ship. Some missed and smashed into the planet.

Five missiles slammed into the hull. The *Boomerang* lurched in mid-air, and its momentum stalled. The tenders coughed before the engines caught. Eli braced his arms to steady himself. “Get us out of here! Hit it hard, River!”

She snarled through bared teeth, fighting the controls. The *Boomerang* lunged straight up, but their path led straight into the cloud of those things swarming all over the place.

“How the hell did they find us?” Waylon boomed.

Jood sat bolt upright in his chair. His fingers flew over his instruments. “They must have followed us from the last confrontation.”

“And waited for this moment?” Eli said. “They could have hit us at any time.”

“I see no other explanation.”

They'd been out of communication for days, then they show up on the grid at Epsilon and this happens? It was too much of a coincidence for Eli. Somebody must have known—

It hit him like a punch in the gut. “Those damn Backbone messages!”

Jood cocked his cubed head. Even tasked with keeping them flying, he had the wherewithal to grasp what Eli meant. “Plausible.”

“Wescott, the bastard!”

Eli cursed himself for the second message. He should have put it together by then, but it probably didn't matter. The damage was already done.

The weirdness with the first message made sense now. If Yasha was telling the truth about Wescott, and Eli was sure she was, then the admiral could use his top-level access to the Backbone. He must have been looking for messages just like theirs. Anything that would expose those incoming ships. When he intercepted their message and got the header data, it would identify the *Boomerang* as the sender. He surely had contacts on Epsilon, one of the largest stations in five sectors. A quick priority message—which unlike Eli's low priority one could cross the Backbone in minutes—and Wescott knew right where they were before they even docked. This little surprise had to be his doing.

Eli didn't care about Earth, but he was starting to care about killing this damn admiral. He was tired of the fight coming to him. If they lived through this, he was going to take the next fight to him.

River jerked right and left in her seat, yanking the controls. The *Boomerang* careened between the alien vessels, but the ship didn't gain enough velocity to avoid them all. The left tender clipped a sphere and sent it spinning away. The tender held, but the vessel's attitude wavered.

River cursed something inarticulate and veered the other way, only to dodge another sphere by inches. Rockets screamed past the cockpit. One of them scraped the hull and skidded off.

“Can you break through?” Eli yelled over the noise.

Jood cast a passing glance at the window before he returned to focusing on his controls. “It appears unlikely. Even if we somehow escaped this cluster, we would only encounter more of them higher up.”

“That's looking on the bright side!” Waylon cut in.

“What about skimming along the other side of the planet?” Eli asked.

“They will surely follow us,” Jood pointed out. “Their propulsion will almost certainly...”

Before he finished speaking, another swarm of those orbs came burning over the horizon. They blockaded the *Boomerang*'s path. They blacked out the sky. Eli couldn't see a single crack through which the *Boomerang* could squeak through.

He changed tack in a second. He shot out his arm and pointed at the window. “There, River! Down there.”

She stared at a precipitous canyon. It cut between the dusty mountains on the far side of the plane. Eli would never dream of risking his ship in a stunt like this, but extreme circumstances called for extreme measures.

River hesitated. “I don't know, Sarge. I don't think I can—”

“Do it!” he thundered as he sprang across the cockpit and punched the throttle hard, as far as it would go. The *Boomerang* took off like a shot. The nose tilted at a sickening angle and the vessel plunged straight down.

River caught the helm just in time. She wrenched the *Boomerang* to run parallel to the ground. The ship streaked over hundreds of miles and all those curious spheres dropped down to hang on her tail.

Eli took a firm grip on his insides. This was it. The *Boomerang* was built for this kind of pursuit. It was time to find out if these things really could outrun her or outmaneuver her. She might not be big or imposing, but damn, she could run when she got a bee in her bonnet.

He retreated to the command console and bumped into Jood getting out of the chair. Eli lowered himself into it, but he kept his attention on the horizon. The gorge rushed at the window faster than he expected. The walls yawned to welcome the *Boomerang* into shadow.

The spheres buzzed behind her. They launched their rockets at the *Boomerang*, but River wavered the engines and the projectiles smashed into the rock. *Go on, you bastards, Eli thought. Waste all your ammo. You won't last ten seconds once we get inside.*

River lurched wide to her right. The *Boomerang* leaned at a wild angle. The ship rolled all the way over at a ninety-degree angle and screamed down the canyon. The swarm tried to follow. They zipped into a tight wedge, but they couldn't keep up with the *Boomerang*. Eli savored the unmistakable concussion of them crashing into the walls.

River straightened up, but within seconds, the walls narrowed. She lost control, squeaking through a narrow channel. The right tender clipped a

stone arch hanging overhead.

Quinn and Yasha appeared in the entrance. Quinn leaned against the bulkhead, sliding toward the helm. She touched River's shoulder. "Let me handle this."

River nodded, but before she could slide out of the seat, a blinding supernova of sunshine blasted through the window. It blinded everyone, but only for a second. The next instant, the *Boomerang* exploded into open space over another rugged plane. It stretched to infinity, dotted here and there with more rock features. Eli couldn't make out a single sign of habitation.

River tried one more time to get up and hand over the controls to Quinn. Of the spheres that had followed them into the gorge, three emerged behind them. "Get us out of here," Eli ordered.

River's shoulders relaxed. She pivoted the pilot's seat around to let her large body out from behind the console when, out of the empty sky, a hundred of those spheres descended into view. They held a patterned formation and turned their rockets toward the *Boomerang*.

Eli turned his head without taking his eyes off those things. "Fire at will!" he thundered.

EIGHTEEN

JOOD UNLOADED the *Boomerang's* weapons on the enemy. River darted out of the way, and Quinn jumped into the seat. She grabbed the controls and the *Boomerang* launched straight into the cloud.

Eli braced himself for a losing fight, but what the hell, right? At least he wasn't dying a pauper. Jood released one shot after another, targeting the spheres, but there were just too many of them. They closed around the *Boomerang*.

Quinn proved her skill as a pilot the way she had hundreds of times before. She steered in a crazy, looping, random course, dodging and diving every which way. She hurdled over them and slithered under clusters of them before they could spin around to aim.

A rocket struck the hull from somewhere. Eli didn't check where it came from. He trained all his attention on a spot far up in the atmosphere. The stars hovered through the thin gas up there. The black reaches of space called to him. He could live with damage to his ship, as long as they made it out of here.

A rapid drumming of impacts rattled the vessel. The *Boomerang* shuddered in mid-air. Quinn attacked the controls twice as hard. "They got the port tender!" she called. "We're running on momentum. We'll be lucky to hold our own out here."

Jood's voice cut the noise from Eli's right side. "Turn us around, Lieutenant."

A hush fell over the cockpit when he said it. Eli didn't know what the Xynnar had in mind. He didn't want to know. He heard the cold determination in Jood's tone, and he took a fresh grip on his seat's armrests.

Quinn responded in an instant. She fired the starboard tender. The *Boomerang* kept rising through the atmosphere, but on a port-curving trajectory. The vessel wouldn't be able to break orbit at this rate.

The orbs closed and their rockets whistled around the *Boomerang*, flying thick and fast. The ship jerked one more time when a projectile struck her tail end, and Jood unleashed the cannons. They sliced in a wide semicircle, decimating every orb in range.

Ten of them detonated, and the shock wave knocked the *Boomerang* back the other way. Jood kept up a steady hail of fire on the enemy, blowing up one after another. The *Boomerang* careened wide and rotated in a complete circle. Quinn struggled to steady her, but after a few seconds, the *Boomerang* drifted to a halt.

"That's it," Quinn called over her shoulder. "I can fire the tender again, but we'll only turn in a circle. What do you want me to do, Dad?"

At that moment, another blow hit the hull. The *Boomerang* floundered in helpless circles again, and Jood popped off another cannon blast. The laser sliced through the cloud. It ruptured two orbs and glanced off a third. It shattered the top curve, and a spray of debris scattered through the air.

The sphere whipped around, and the crew all stared through the cockpit window at the sight. Hovering there in front of them, close enough to see clearly, the cut-in-half orb revealed a tiny cockpit inside its dense outer covering. Whatever material constructed that thing, it normally hid the pilot inside it, now revealed in plain view for all to see.

Eli blinked, but the vision didn't change. A man sat in the cockpit, glaring at the *Boomerang* through a protective helmet. Two eyes, one nose, one mouth—everything about him looked as human as anyone Eli had ever met, right down to the two arms moving over the controls. The gloved hands articulated five nimble fingers each.

As that realization dawned, Yasha whispered behind him. She hardly breathed, but her voice murmured in his ear. "Amir! It's Amir Sulemani. It can't be!"

An old maxim crossed Eli's mind. *Just because you're paranoid doesn't mean they aren't after you.*

Almost simultaneously, Sulemani stabbed his finger at his console. Two rockets unlocked from under his vessel. They trailed through the sky, converging on the *Boomerang*. Jood fired again, and this time, he blasted

Sulemani's craft to a million tiny fragments. The remains of the orb exploded in all directions, and the rockets crashed into the *Boomerang*.

"We've got a hull breach!" Quinn cried. "We're losing attitude control."

"Hit it!" Eli bellowed.

"We can't maintain a straight course!" she screamed back. "We're going in circles."

"Just do it! I don't care where we go!"

She punched the throttle. The *Boomerang* lurched, but she didn't go anywhere. The ship traced an orbital path around the swarm before the vessel turned her nose straight into it.

Jood fired three more shots into the cloud. "Our laser cores are depleted, Eli. I am diverting all power to propulsion. We have no more weapons to fire."

The *Boomerang* slowed, but its momentum carried it directly into the path of the swarm. More of those spheres zipped back and forth across Eli's view. They released their rockets in a continuous hail against the *Boomerang*.

The ship lost forward propulsion. Quinn's hands moved more slowly over the controls. Eli's heart sank when he saw her stop and lean back in the chair. She didn't turn around. She kept staring at the scene outside the window.

All at once, a bone-shaking blow struck the ship. It hurled the *Boomerang* sideways and dislodged Waylon from his place at the bulkhead. Yasha staggered before she caught her balance.

Eli righted himself in his chair just in time to see a dozen of those things rise out of nowhere, all firing on the *Boomerang* in unison. Their rockets charged for the cockpit. Eli cringed, bracing for impact, and the missiles smashed into the window with colossal power.

The ship hurtled backward. The force ripped Eli out of his seat. Bodies sailed past him to slam into the window. The next minute, another explosion shattered the vessel from behind. The blow yanked Eli off his feet. He flew through a whirlwind of tossed limbs and broken glass.

He crashed down on the cruel metal floor. His head hit the bulkhead and stars burst in front of his eyes. He swam out of unconsciousness. Distant thuds vibrated the ship underneath him. He blinked the fog out of his head and found himself staring through the destroyed window.

A hot, howling wind rushed into the cockpit. Hundreds of those things whizzed back and forth, firing everywhere. The *Boomerang* hovered helplessly in the air, but for how much longer?

He tried to get up and discovered a weight pinning him down. He checked to make sure he wasn't injured. Then he realized a body lay sprawled over his midsection. A rounded back sloped down to a head lolled against the floor.

Eli went through another confusion of ideas and sensations before he put two and two together. The body belonged to Yasha. Her legs stuck out at angles on his other side. Her weight wouldn't let him get up.

He had to get up. He had to get to the command console. He had to...do something, even if he couldn't figure out what just yet. Once he got upright, sitting in his correct place, something would come to him.

Eli touched Yasha, but she didn't move. He patted up her back. She was breathing, at least. He prodded up her spine. She didn't appear to be hurt, either, apart from getting knocked unconscious by hitting her head against the floor.

He grabbed her by the back of the neck to pry her up. If he could only move her, he could get to the controls. Then he would be able to...

The moment his grip closed around her neck, a flash hit him in the head.

NINETEEN

HE LEAPED BACK, but his fingers remained clamped around her neck in an unbreakable clasp. He ordered himself again and again to let go, but that horrible jolt of energy forked into his brain before he could stop it.

He winked into the yard, running around with the dog. Little Yasha laughed and leaped around, teasing the animal with a stick. The dog bounded at her to catch it and tackled her to the ground. While he watched, the woman came out on the porch. She laughed and called them both. Happiness and tranquility radiated out of the memory.

Another explosion shattered Eli's mind and he flashed to... He grappled his brain into strange shapes trying to locate the time and place. He was back on that moon, with thousands of those orbs lined up in rows as far as the eye could see. They weren't activated yet. They sat dead and motionless, with that big screen to one side.

Eli lay flat on his back, staring up at the sky. Three men and one woman towered over him, punching and kicking and clubbing him with objects. He felt their strikes from a long way away, but he didn't feel any pain. Through the horror of that moment, he recognized that this had never happened to him. He was seeing another one of Yasha's memories.

In the confusion and terror of the nightmare, he recognized his assailants' faces. He recognized them with Yasha's awareness. She knew each and every one of them only too well. A tall, grey-haired man stood off to one side. He observed the beating, stroking his beard in a continuous idiosyncratic movement.

In the timeless void of dream, Eli snapped alert in a split second. He lay flat on his back against the *Boomerang's* cockpit bulkhead. His fingers

ripped off Yasha's neck with no effort from him.

"EMP!" Jood lunged for the engineering station. He vaulted over Waylon and Quinn, who were lying unconscious on the floor. He caught the controls. "She disabled us again."

Through the window, Eli stared at hundreds of spheres raining onto the planet. The *Boomerang* tilted in all directions. The propulsion of the starboard tender stopped the vessel from tumbling head over heels to her destruction, but this couldn't end well.

The horizon shot past the window. Eli made another effort to get out from under Yasha, but he hesitated to touch her again. He scooped his arm under her stomach and rolled her over. He checked again that she was breathing, then jumped to the command console.

"The hull breach is interfering with our stability," Jood said.

Eli focused all his attention on the instruments. "I'll section off the galley and the aft compartment. I'm sealing all bulkheads behind the cockpit."

"That did it," Jood replied. "The landing gear is stuck, and I must maintain attitude control to ensure we land in an upright posture. They will have to be released manually."

Eli messed with the controls for a minute, but he gave it up. The landing gear wouldn't release. "Leave it to me. I'll handle it."

Jood looked up, but his features gave nothing away. "You must be careful, Eli. With the hull breach drawing air into the ship, you might get caught in the flow."

Eli punched a series of commands into his console to unlock one or two bulkheads, but not all of them. He got out of his seat and moved away. "You don't worry about me. Just get the ship on the ground. I'll take care of myself."

He didn't wait around. He plunged out of the cockpit and hustled down the gangway. He came to the first sealed bulkhead and heard the wind roaring behind it. He would have to get creative to release the landing gear in time.

Eli cast his mind around his ship. He knew every inch of her. He grazed his fingertips over the cold steel running to his left. She groaned and strained against Jood's efforts. She complained to Eli that she couldn't, she didn't want to. She begged him to take pity on her and let her do things the easy way.

She always told him she couldn't and didn't want to, but she always did. She always came through for him. She never let him down, and she wouldn't let him down this time. He told her so through his fingertips.

He came to the sidewall and dropped to his knees. He unlocked a vent cover near the gangway catwalk. It offered barely enough space for him to get inside, but he didn't need to wedge his whole body into it. If he dangled from his waist, he could reach the landing gear—at least one half of it.

He wriggled into the hole and flattened his stomach against the catwalk. It dug into his flesh, but from here, he could see the landing gear wedged in place. He pushed against it. Nothing happened.

Frigid blasts of icy wind ripped through the ship's underbelly. It pierced his cheeks and tears sprang to his eyes, but Eli blinked them away to squint at the landing gear. A piece of twisted metal braced against the pivot strut. It must have come loose in the battle and stuck there. It held the landing gear retracted, and wouldn't allow it to lower.

He stretched against the sharp edge of the gangway. It cut deeper, but Eli pushed himself to his limit. He struck the pivot strut with his fist, but nothing would budge it.

He raced through every possibility, but he didn't find anything down here to help him. He hauled himself out of the vent and returned to a service locker behind the cockpit. Explosions went off beyond the command station. He didn't have much time before the *Boomerang* crashed in a ball of flames.

Eli snatched a heavy spanner from the locker and dove back down the hole. The wind shrieked louder than ever. The *Boomerang* must be close to the ground now. He wound back the spanner and pounded against the obstruction. He bared his teeth and roared his rage at it. He delivered another blow, and the wedge tore loose. The landing gear purred down into place. Eli stared through the opening at the orange-yellow soil coming at him a mile a minute.

He yelled in spite of himself, thinking his end had come, but the instant the landing gear locked in place, the *Boomerang* slowed. It didn't slow to a landing speed, but he sensed through the hull a barely perceptible nudge against the ship's fall.

The planet rushed into view way too fast. Eli didn't have time to pull himself back inside. He didn't have time to get into a safe position—if one

could possibly exist. He threw his arms over his face again, and the *Boomerang* smashed into the ground with a deafening boom.

Eli flopped against the brutal edge of the hole one more time, and his upper body struck the hull. Shattering pain fired through him and he collapsed out of his wits.

He had no idea how much time must have passed before he came to his senses. He blinked blood out of his eyes and stared down at a bare, dry, dead field of gravel. He was on Epsilon. He wasn't dead. The *Boomerang* still held him up, but he almost hated to get up to find out how much damage she must have sustained in that fall.

Eli's stomach turned when he tried to pull himself up. His head hurt. Everything hurt. He grasped the ledge, but it still took him several minutes to crawl back and prop himself on the gangway.

Silence echoed all around him. Was he the only one left alive? That horrible thought drove him to his feet. He teetered against the bulkhead before he floundered forward to the cockpit.

TWENTY

ELI STARED into the cockpit at the destruction waiting for him. Tim went from one body to another, checking everyone. He shone a light into Yasha's eyes and listened to her lungs.

Tim patted Waylon down. The big man leaned against the bulkhead and wiped blood off his mouth with his shirt sleeve. He shoved Tim away. "I'm fine. Leave me alone."

The doctor turned to River. "Are you hurt anywhere, River?"

She rubbed her side. "I'm banged up, but I'm okay."

Tim walked around the pilot's station and stopped. He stared down at the floor without moving. Eli swallowed hard, watching him.

Tim crouched down. Eli slipped forward to see him kneeling over Quinn. Her blonde hair covered her face; she was lying on her stomach across the cockpit wall. She didn't move when Tim touched her. He grasped her behind the neck exactly the way Eli had grabbed Yasha. Eli experienced a moment of *déjà vu* when her memories rushed into his mind, but he didn't lose his awareness again.

Tim supported Quinn's head with one hand and pulled her over with his other. He turned her onto her back and laid her down. The instant Eli laid eyes on his daughter, the bottom fell out from under his feet. A million tiny pinpricks dotted her face.

Quinn stared up at Tim through pools of blood clouding her eyes. The whites glowed with bright red blood trapped beneath the surface. A harsh line of red cut across her lower jaw. Everything below it stood out bright red. Above that line, all those microscopic blood blisters peppered her pink skin.

She sniffed, panting to catch her breath. As soon as she exhaled, a trickle of blood ran out of her nose. It streaked down her cheek and dripped past her ear. Her gaze darted around Tim's face.

Eli caught a fleeting glimpse of Tim's stricken expression, and his world crumbled. If Quinn's appearance didn't tell him everything, Tim's features confirmed it. "You're gonna be okay, baby," he stammered. "We can fix this."

Quinn turned away. Her gaze scanned the cockpit. She looked at Jood standing by the command console, and then she spotted Eli. Just for a second, he didn't think he could do this. He'd said and done so much that he regretted. And now, to stand by and watch her die? That was impossible.

"Dad," she rasped.

All his defenses crumbled, and Eli sank to his knees at her side. "I'm here, sweetheart. I'm right here."

He lifted her gently off the floor and felt blood on her back. His fingers swam in it, but he ignored that. What did that mean in the grand scheme of things? His only daughter's body hung limp and dead in his arms, but he hugged her to him. He bent down and kissed her bloodstained forehead.

"Dad..." Those blood-red eyes staring up at him didn't look like hers. This blob of destroyed flesh couldn't possibly be his beloved child. "Dad..."

"I'm here. I'll always be here."

"Dad..." She gulped again. "Go to Earth."

He stiffened and started to shake his head. A thousand arguments pushed those words out of his mind.

"Dad...I...I believe in you. Take Yasha to Earth. She...she can save Earth. Please, Dad."

Eli forced himself to look down into those demonic eyes. His mind said, *I can't do that*. His heart and soul said, *I won't do that*, but something else spoke through his voice. He swallowed hard. "Okay, sweetheart. You don't worry about that."

"Promise me, Dad." Her voice took on that hard edge that told him there would be no discussion. "Promise me you'll do it."

Eli turned his head away and wound up looking at Yasha, lying unconscious and unaware a few feet away. He could think of a lot of things he'd rather do than take her to Earth.

Quinn croaked in his ear. "The captain who saved those Xynnar wouldn't run off and leave billions to die." Her voice dropped to a breathy

whisper. “I believe in you, Dad.”

That voice called up forgotten memories from his days in the Squadrons. He remembered as if it was yesterday what he was thinking when he’d decided to rescue those Xynnar.

He was thinking he wasn’t the man to leave defenseless people to die without doing something. He was thinking his career in the Squadrons wasn’t worth his self-respect. He was thinking he didn’t need the Squadrons as long as he could look himself in the mirror every morning.

He wasn’t a different person. He was still the same man he’d been back then. Quinn was right. Somehow, she knew it when he didn’t.

He discovered her staring at him with eyes cut straight out of Hell itself. He couldn’t look away. He locked his gaze on her. “I promise you I’ll go to Earth.”

Quinn’s body shuddered in his grasp. She didn’t take her gaze off him. She relaxed with her eyes still fixed on him.

Tim’s husky snarl cut the silence. “You goddamned bastard! I’ll kill you for this.”

Eli didn’t look at him. He laid his daughter back down on the floor, and a gush of blood poured out of the side of her mouth. She stared up at him with her eerie red eyes. She didn’t look away. Even in death, she challenged him to keep his promise.

He straightened up. He gazed down at her and didn’t look away, not even when Waylon barked from across the cockpit, “You don’t seriously intend to go back to Earth, do you? You’d be arrested and thrown in the brig, you know.”

Tim whipped around and bellowed at the top of his lungs. “Shut your stinking hole, you piece of shit!” He spun the other way and collapsed on top of Quinn. He grabbed her and buried his face in her neck, sobbing unashamedly.

Eli just stared down, unmoving. Quinn’s eyes burned up at him from the floor. She never looked away. Her dead face looked deep inside him, seeing things he didn’t want her to see, but he didn’t tear himself away. He owed her this much, at least.

None of the others moved. No one tried to comfort Tim. Eli’s insides twisted in knots. Part of him wished he could show his devastation the way Tim did. Maybe that would make him human again.

He wasn't human. He was a robot. He was a dead thing on a conveyor belt to some destiny that had nothing to do with him.

Across the cockpit, Yasha stirred. She groaned and heaved herself up on her hands and knees. She moved to sit down on the floor and looked around. She blinked when she saw Tim crying over Quinn's dead body. Her cheeks blanched and she looked up at Eli.

He broke from his trance and pivoted on his heel.

TWENTY-ONE

ELI MARCHED AFT to the first sealed bulkhead and punched his security code into the control panel. The bulkhead released. He went through the ship, releasing one bulkhead after another, until he came to the aft hatch.

He let down the ramp and strode outside. That conveyor belt carried him of its own accord. All these years, he'd felt like he had to haul himself through every excruciating minute of his day. Now it all happened outside himself. He didn't even have to try.

Eli climbed up the hull and surveyed the damage. He checked the port tender and unscrewed the housing to assess the extent of the repairs it would need to get it up and running. He walked around on the hull for a while, but he didn't hear any voices inside.

From this vantage point, he cast a passing glance around the vast plain stretched on all sides. The ship looked tiny and frail and lost in that expanse. Hundreds of orbs speckled the ground for miles around. They lay still amongst the gravel and didn't move. They pointed their rocket ports to the sky or at odd angles. They showed no sign of activating or flying away.

Eli returned his attention to making a thorough survey of the hull. Then he went through every compartment and berth until he understood exactly what he had to do to get his ship off the ground again.

He went back into the cockpit. Tim squatted next to Quinn's body, but now a white sheet covered her so Eli couldn't see her. Tim sniffed back tears, looking down at her.

Jood sat in his usual place at the engineering station. His fingers played over the controls. Other than a faint beeping of the systems responding to his commands, a funereal silence blanketed the cockpit.

Waylon sat propped against the bulkhead. He hadn't moved. Yasha straightened up when Eli appeared, but she didn't say anything. River rotated the pilot's chair around. "How does it look out there, Sarge? Can we fix the tender?"

Eli surveyed one face after another. He'd prepared himself for this moment, but before he could say anything, Tim craned back his head. He glared at Eli in unvarnished loathing. "You killed your own daughter. You're lawless. You're evil. That's what you are."

"Hey!" River barked from her seat. "He didn't kill anybody. She got hit in the firefight. You got no business blaming Sarge for this. It could have been any of us. You wouldn't be crying over Waylon if he was the one that got killed, would you?"

Waylon guffawed. "I'd love to see that."

"You wouldn't see it," River fired back. "You'd be dead."

"He'd still be responsible for it," Tim said. "He's the one who got us into this the same way he did on the *Devilfish*. Every death is his responsibility. Every death is more blood on his hands and he doesn't even care."

Waylon rolled his eyes to heaven. "Can't you talk about anything but the damned *Devilfish*? Leave it alone for once."

Tim glared back at Waylon.

"Here's the thing." The minute Eli spoke, everyone fell silent. He didn't have to yell. He spoke out of a glacial calm. Not all the insults in the world could disturb him. "The tender is reparable. We can weld the hull, and she'll fly again. The EMP didn't damage our operating systems. It never seems to. It knocks us out, but only until we bring everything back online."

Waylon puffed out his scarred cheeks. "That's a relief. Let's get going."

"Hold it," Eli snapped. "I'm going back to Earth."

River wheeled around in the pilot's seat. In unison, she and Waylon said, "You're what?"

"I made a promise, and I intend to keep it. I'm taking Yasha to intercept the swarm. Her EMP is the only weapon strong enough to take them down in one hit. You should see it outside. It's a graveyard."

"Insane," Waylon muttered.

Eli stared at the big man. "I promised Quinn."

Waylon glared at Eli like he'd just swallowed something rotten, but he said nothing.

Eli turned to River. Her expression seemed to be bordering on panic. “You can’t do this!” she exclaimed. “You’ll get arrested and imprisoned like Waylon said. The Squadrons won’t be kind. You gotta realize that, Sarge.”

He indulged a wry smile. “Maybe they’ll decide to be kind if I help them defeat an enemy they don’t have a prayer of beating on their own. Either that, or they’ll be so busy fighting the horde themselves that they’ll forget to arrest me. I don’t really know. I only know I’m doing this. Anybody who doesn’t want to come with me is welcome to disembark now. The Outpost isn’t far. Once we get the ship running, we’re going. Jood estimates we have just a dozen hours to break through them and get to Earth.”

The others stared at him with their mouths open—all except Tim. He growled through bared teeth. “Don’t think this changes anything between us.”

Eli turned his icy gaze on the young man. “Nothing will change anything between us. If you don’t want to ride back to Earth with me, I understand.” He turned back the other way and scanned his crew. “Anybody else want to get off, be my guest, but I gotta work fast. I don’t have time to stand around discussing it.”

“What about me?” Yasha cut in. “Don’t I have something to say about this? I already told you I’m not going back to Earth.”

“You have to,” Eli said simply when he looked at her. “You’re the only person who can implicate Admiral Wescott.”

She blinked. Tim’s head shot up. “What did you say?”

“When you released the EMP, you transmitted a memory into my mind. How much do you remember about your voyage out here on the *Manatee*?”

Yasha looked down, and her hand flew to her forehead. “I.... Well, almost nothing. One minute we were crossing the Gamma Belt. Admiral Wescott told the pilot to steer toward a certain system, and that’s the last thing I remember.”

“You probably had one of your seizures, and it wiped your memory the way it wiped our logs. You might even have released an EMP that caused the *Manatee* to crash. I don’t know about that. I only know he was on that moon with you and the other four officers. *They* activated the swarm to attack Earth.”

Tim rocketed to his feet. “You can’t seriously expect us to believe that an admiral in the Squadrons sent...” He waved toward the cockpit window.

“That!”

Eli followed his gaze to nothing. “I saw him. He was on that moon. He ordered the other four to beat up Yasha, and they dumped her where we found her.”

“And you just saw that?” Tim asked sarcastically.

“Yes,” Eli said. His simple conviction seemed to stump Tim. Eli looked at Yasha. “I think there’s some process, something like a mental imprinting, that didn’t work. They couldn’t control you.”

Tim paced back and forth. “Yeah, but that doesn’t mean...”

“We all saw Amir Sulemani piloting one of those things. I can only assume the four of them are piloting a swarm of drones remotely from four command modules. They’re linked somehow.”

“When we destroyed Sulemani’s craft, the attack did not cease,” Jood said.

“Maybe they can operate semi-remotely with only minimal input. I don’t know. But severing the link with the EMP did that,” Eli said, gesturing at the cockpit window. “And how they are controlling them isn’t important. Wescott flew the operatives out here to take the swarm to Earth.”

“But why?” Yasha asked. “Camp Utopia was one thing, but this... Why would he unleash an assault like this? That swarm, it’s massive. It won’t just overrun the Squadrons. It might wipe out Earth entirely.”

Eli swiveled around. When he looked at her, he felt some pieces slotting into place but the puzzle was far from complete. “I don’t know why he’s doing it, but he is. Whatever he’s doing, it started at Camp Utopia. He deliberately made the camp vulnerable to invasion, and now this. He’s up to something. I don’t know what, but I don’t need to know. I just have to stop him.”

Waylon, River, and Jood exchanged glances. “We didn’t sign up for this,” River grumbled. “None of us wants to go back to Earth. We signed on with you on the understanding we would never do anything like this. It’s suicide for us as much as for you. I mean, do you really want to run the risk of taking Jood back to Earth? He’d be in exactly the same situation as he was at New Sydney. He’d be executed on sight.”

“I will go,” Jood said without hesitation.

Eli looked at his expressionless face and knew better than to question him. He was going.

“Well, good for you,” Waylon said. “Some of us aren’t crazy.”

River nodded in agreement.

Eli shook their excuses out of his mind. “You can make all the arguments you want. I’m going. I don’t ask any of you to come with me. You can take your pay to Epsilon and pay your passage to anywhere in the galaxy you want to go.”

“That’s easy for you to say,” Yasha added. “I don’t have any pay. I don’t have any way to get off this rock.”

He smiled at her. For the first time, he genuinely liked her. “You’re a Squadron-trained special operative. I’m sure you can use your skills to find your way.”

She narrowed her eyes at him. “Without me, you’ve got no chance.”

Eli cracked a full grin. For some reason, this hopeless mission made him happy. “My point exactly.”

Her eyebrows jumped up in a fleeting hint of uncertainty. “I don’t know how to release the EMP. It’s completely out of my control. You said yourself that must be why they dumped me.”

“*You* don’t know how to release it, but I think I do.” He hesitated. “I think *we* do.”

Yasha’s eyes narrowed. “You think...” She stopped.

Eli nodded. “I think you imprinted on me. And I think, together, we can trigger you.”

He turned to the others. “No more talk. Either get to work repairing this tub, or pack your stuff and head for the Outpost.”

TWENTY-TWO

7 Hours Until Annihilation

THE SUN STARTED to set on Epsilon before Eli entered the aft hatch. He'd spent five hours welding the ripped hull to make the *Boomerang* sturdy again. He couldn't help but notice the many patches and repairs to the aging craft. She'd done some hard parsecs, and she wouldn't hold out forever.

He sighed, running his hand over welded seams, old and new. If Tim had his way, Eli wouldn't survive this misguided trip to Earth anyway. Assuming he managed to land the *Boomerang* on Earth, he'd be thrown in prison for the rest of his life and would never see his beloved ship again. She'd make this one last run and then she'd probably take a trip to the scrapyard.

He entered the hatch to find Waylon going through a crate of cannon parts in the storage bay. The big enforcer snapped a clip of ammunition into the magazine and locked it off.

Eli cocked his head to study the man. He'd flown with Waylon for years, and he still couldn't call him a friend. "You'll have a hard time carrying that as far as the Outpost."

Waylon shot him a mischievous grin. “Who said anything about the Outpost? This is for the Squadrons. As soon as we clear those mosquitos out there, the Squadrons’ll come gunning for us. They won’t get near us without tasting some of this lead.”

Eli studied Waylon’s scarred visage. Waylon didn’t come right out and say he was accompanying Eli back to Earth. He didn’t have to, and Eli certainly would never express any gratitude or gratification about it. That would only make Waylon uncomfortable. It violated an unspoken code between them.

Eli only nodded and continued forward. He spotted River hanging out of the vent above the landing gear. He heard banging down there, but he didn’t interfere. He went on through to the cockpit and leaned over the engineering station. He propped his arms on the console, punched the intercom, and spoke into it. “I’m standing by when you’re ready, Jood.”

“Five minutes,” the voice came back.

Without straightening, Eli glanced up, and his eye fell on the broken window in front of him. Out there on the plain, turning dusky pale in the sinking light, Tim stood to one side, looking down at the shrouded form of Quinn’s body. Flames licked off the sheet. The ghostly light merged with the vacuous immensity of the planet.

Eli puffed out his cheeks in a heavy breath, but he would never dare to go out there. He had no place at Quinn’s burial, no matter how crude and prosaic it might be. He left that honor to Tim. Tim was the one who belonged at her side right now.

Even so, he found himself standing in the presence of something huge and portentous. He was witnessing Quinn’s funeral, and he hung his head. He allowed the fullness of her loss to hit him in all its finality. He’d lost his only child, the one person who’d believed in him and held him to a higher standard.

The last thread holding him to humanity dissolved and broke at long last, but she’d left him with something even more priceless.

She’d given him a purpose. He had a place to be and something to do. He had people depending on him.

This mission of hers would probably end in disaster. He would probably die and be responsible for the deaths of those closest to him, but he made the decision to do it anyway. No one made it for him, and Eli was glad. He wanted to hurry up and get it done.

The intercom squawked and woke him from his thoughts. “The tender is ready, Eli.”

He looked up. For a second, he watched the flames flicker against the gathering twilight. He’d set his resolve to do this, and he wouldn’t turn aside. Never again.

Eli turned back to the engineering station and sat down in the seat. He hit the intercom again. “Stand clear.”

A disembodied voice bellowed up the aft hatch. “All clear!”

Eli entered the activation sequence and the port tender groaned, rotating around. It scratched and scraped in agony. It chugged and coughed before it caught. It built up speed, whirring faster, until it whined and hummed at its usual speed.

He left it running for a minute while he checked all the other parameters. The hull strength came up slightly lower than standard, but he didn’t have time to mess with it now. If it failed, they’d be no worse off than they already were.

He bent over the intercom for the last time. “Load up!”

TWENTY-THREE

FOOTSTEPS RANG ON THE RAMP. He looked up to see Tim striding back toward the *Boomerang*. He left Quinn's body burning in the middle of that endless expanse. Eli's stomach contracted again. They were leaving her behind on this rotten planet. She would be here for the rest of eternity. He wished more than anything that he could take her back to a royal Squadron burial on Earth, but that was Tim's decision.

Just then, Yasha shouldered into the cockpit. She carried a large curved plate of glass between her hands. She shot a grin at Eli. "I got it."

She pivoted past the pilot's station and fitted the glass into place. A few moments later, Waylon appeared with the welding torch. Between the two of them, they sealed the window across the gaping hole.

Jood entered, and Eli vacated the engineering station. When he stood up to cross to the command console, he discovered Tim standing there. Eli cocked his head. "Strap in, Doctor, and we'll drop you off at the Outpost before we break orbit."

Tim clenched his teeth and scowled at him. "I've decided to go with you."

Eli raised his eyebrows. "Is that so?"

Tim cast a quick glance around the cockpit. "It's the fastest way back to Earth, I guess."

Eli let it go at that. He didn't exactly think he owed Tim anything, but he didn't need to understand. The doctor had his reasons for traveling on board the *Boomerang* with people he claimed to hate, instead of taking a hired transport.

Yasha and Waylon finished what they were doing. River lowered herself into the pilot's station. Tim glared at everything one more time and marched away. Eli let him go. Probably nothing in the galaxy would ever repair the rift between them, but Eli could live with that.

He took his seat in the command chair. "Take us out, River."

The *Boomerang* shuddered and wavered when the landing gear lost contact with the ground. She cleared the gravel. The fire shrank to a speck. The next instant, River hit the throttle and the *Boomerang* screeched away. The fire vanished, and that was the end of Lieutenant Quinn Bryce.

The *Boomerang* broke the atmosphere. In a few seconds, Epsilon dwindled to an orange ball floating in a sea of black. Eli turned away. "Lay in a course for Earth."

"Course laid in," River said.

"Are we going to catch them, Jood?"

Jood was studying his console. "Perhaps. I'll know more in a couple of hours. If the hypothesis of a handful of central controlling ships is correct, then the mass of ships that attacked us suggests that the entirety of the group is not nearly as far along as we'd feared."

Eli nodded. "Full throttle," he said to River. "Give her everything she's got."

The stars smeared behind the window and the *Boomerang* took off, chewing up the parsecs like they were nothing. For a few minutes, Eli waited to see if the hull would hold its integrity. After a while, he forgot to listen for any tearing sound and focused his attention on the course ahead. On the mission ahead. On his daughter's dying words.

Five hours passed like five minutes.

"We're coming up on a few stragglers," River said. "It looks like they're trying to catch up with the main swarm."

"How far are the frontrunners from Earth?"

"At their current rate of travel, they will enter Earth's orbit in approximately two hours," Jood said.

A scorch of adrenaline hit Eli in the ribs. "Do we have time to get in front of them?"

"Very little time for that," Jood said. "At full throttle, we will intercept the main swarm in one hour. At our top speed, we will break the atmosphere with less than thirty minutes to spare. We will have no time to alert the Squadrons."

“Their early warning systems should pick up the horde,” River said.

“Even so,” Jood argued, “it leaves minimal time for the Squadrons to mount a defense. If your plan includes detonating an EMP to deactivate the swarm, that would mean thousands of projectiles plummeting through the atmosphere at terminal velocity. This could cause massive loss of life even without the spheres targeting the human population.”

Before today, Eli would have replied to this information by asking Jood for his recommendations. He didn’t do that now. He faced straight ahead. Nothing turned him aside and nothing ever would. This mission was all his. The others were just along for the ride. “Are we still traveling at full throttle?”

“We’re full throttle *now*,” River said, “but we’ll slow down when we enter the swarm. We’ll need to evade them, which is asking a lot, considering how many of them there are.”

“Don’t cut throttle,” Eli said.

She swung her chair around and her eyes widened. “Sarge?”

“I said don’t cut throttle. Don’t slow down. Hit the swarm at full throttle and don’t break speed or course until we get in front of them. Jood, arm our guns with everything we have and get Waylon suited up for external cannon.”

Jood looked up. “That would be extremely ill-advised, considering their numbers.”

“This whole mission is ill-advised. Get him up there on the double.”

Jood turned back to his controls. River dared to peek over her shoulder. “What do you have in mind, Sarge?”

“We’re going to break through the swarm, firing everything we have. This is gonna take some fancy flying, River. You won’t have Quinn to bail you out, so I’m counting on you to put as many of them behind you as possible. The commotion should trigger the early warning systems long before we get within range.”

“And when we *do* get within range?” Jood asked.

“Then we have to find a way to get into the center of the swarm so we can set off the EMP.”

They didn’t ask any more questions. Eli heard how flimsy the whole thing sounded, but none of that mattered. He’d made a promise, and hang the consequences.

The first job was to trigger the early warning system. If the *Boomerang* could at least rob the horde of the element of surprise, he would fulfill his promise. Everything else would be icing on the cake.

TWENTY-FOUR

1 Hour Until Annihilation

ELI LEFT the cockpit to find Yasha and Waylon in the aft compartment. Yasha helped lock the armor plating for external cannon around Waylon's limbs. Eli measured the progress. "You ready to do some damage?"

Waylon grinned. "Always. How long do we have?"

"Not long, and I want you out there and ready to fire as soon as we get within range. We're already overtaking stragglers. When I give the signal, start picking off every last mother's son of 'em and don't spare the lead. Understand?"

"Oh, yeah." Waylon lifted one of his arms. A monstrous cannon was locked onto his armor by bulging rivets. The gauntlet completely obliterated his hand grasping the controls inside his suit. When he raised it, the weapon clicked by itself when a round slotted into the chamber.

Yasha stepped forward, holding an enormous domed helmet. She slotted it over Waylon's head and latched it down tight to the body plate. Fog wafted over the transparent visor, but when she hooked up a length of tubing to his suit, it cleared and he started breathing normally.

Eli clapped him on the back. "Get out there. Here's your tether."

He attached a jointed cable to Waylon's back, and Waylon started to shuffle toward the hatch. He could barely move with the weight of a couple of tons of metal hanging from his limbs, but he wouldn't need to move fast where he was going.

He halted at the edge of the ramp and twisted around to give Eli a thumbs up. Eli and Yasha retreated past the bulkhead. Eli hit the control and the bulkhead boomed into place. A hiss of air sounded beyond the barrier, followed by thumps against the hull of heavy footsteps marching up the *Boomerang's* side.

Eli strode back to the cockpit and took his place in the command chair. On his console, he pulled up an exterior display of the *Boomerang's* roof. Waylon clomped across the steel curve to a port in the ship's very crown. He took little hopping steps in the weightless void. With a tiny jump, he dropped into the port, and the locks clamped him into position.

A series of readouts raced across Eli's console. Waylon was all buckled in, with the ship attached to his life-support system. On the screen, Waylon swung his cannon around. Eli touched a release mechanism, and another gargantuan weapon rose out of the hull in front of Waylon.

The screen displayed Waylon going through some triggering tests on the external cannon port. Ammunition slotted into the magazine, and the weapon started to draw power from the propulsion system to operate its laser. A similar display would be feeding this information to Waylon's control display out on the *Boomerang's* hull.

"Here they come!" River called.

Eli barely had time to look up when hundreds of those thing rocketed past the *Boomerang*. They streaked behind the ship so fast Eli didn't get a good look at them. The *Boomerang* plunged into the swarm, dipping and weaving. At that instant, a sizzling laser erupted from the external cannon. Waylon swiveled in a complete circle and came swinging back the other way, laying into the spheres with both guns.

Eli yanked around. "Transfer main weapons systems to me."

Jood looked up for a fraction of a second, but said nothing. Eli wasn't leaving control of this battle to anyone else. He'd come here to fight, and that was what he would do.

The next second, the weapons display on his console flickered to life without a word of protest from Jood. He might have reflexes that would

leave any human in the dust, but if he thought using external cannon against this horde was ill-advised, then he wasn't the right person for the job.

Eli didn't hesitate. He plunged his hands into the weapons control ports on either side of his chair. The instant he experienced that familiar close grip, he fired.

His gaze darted every which way, settling on one orb after another only long enough to measure his firing trajectory. His fingers danced over the buttons and triggers inside the ports. He followed River's flight through the cloud of spheres, blasting as fast as he could think.

Far ahead, a tiny ball of blue, green, and white whizzed into view. Before Eli could react, the *Boomerang* veered up and down and sideways to slither around another cluster of the spheres. River jolted upright at the helm. "Hold onto your panties! We're screwed!"

Eli cast a single fleeting glimpse toward the planet. A solid flank of the spheres separated the *Boomerang* from Earth, growing larger all the time. As Eli watched, all those enemy craft pivoted around to train their weapons on the *Boomerang*.

River howled, slamming the controls all the way to one side and then the other. Eli was firing too fast to get distracted by her erratic flight pattern. He blasted his cannon in an incessant pounding rhythm. He hammered individual spheres and sliced them to mincemeat with his lasers. His shots hit groups of them packed so close that dozens exploded.

River bellowed again, steering the *Boomerang* around those things. Eli and Waylon kept up their bombardment so fast she didn't bump into any of them, but now they faced a different problem. The strange army thought they would surprise Earth, only to get surprised by the *Boomerang* attacking from behind.

Now that surprise was blown, and Eli looked down the barrels of thousands of rocket tubes all pointed in his direction. The orbs broke off their inevitable advance toward Earth to train their guns on the *Boomerang*. They all unleashed their fire at once.

"Hard to port!" Eli roared. "Now, River!"

She screeched something inaudible, but she obeyed instantaneously. She tilted out of her chair, hauling the controls to her left. The *Boomerang* listed all the way over and somersaulted in a twirl before the attitude controls kicked in. She slammed the throttle, and the *Boomerang* zoomed in a wide

arc through the cloud. All the spheres whizzed after the ship, blasting their rockets in her wake.

All too soon, Eli spotted the far perimeter of the swarm. The horde thinned out and empty space revealed stars against the inky sky. Eli paused his fire only long enough to formulate a plan. “Circle, River! Circle around inside the swarm.”

She whipped around in her chair. “What? Why? Don’t you want to...?”

Before she finished speaking, the *Boomerang* zipped through the thickest mass of spheres, and enemy craft flanked the ship by the thousands. The vessel streaked in a wide arc to face Earth again. Sure enough, hundreds of Squadron ships lifted through the atmosphere on an intercept course for the horde.

Eli’s heart leaped into his throat, but only for a second. The next minute, rockets exploded against the hull. The *Boomerang* punched through the last of the swarm, with all those attackers burning up behind her.

“Turn back, River!” Eli roared. “Turn back now! Cut through the swarm and circle on the inside. Now!”

She hesitated, and he saw his worst nightmare coming true. The *Boomerang* plunged out of the cloud, heading straight for the Squadron ships and presenting themselves as an easy target.

TWENTY-FIVE

ELI CLAMPED his teeth and rounded on River, ready to rip her a new one, but she descended on the helm, working to her limit. She yanked the controls all the way back and shot up at a stomach-turning pace. She started to climb and the *Boomerang* leaned over on her back. River burned in a tight ring and dove straight back down into the very heart of the swarm.

More than half the spheres tailing her unloaded their rockets on the craft, but River evaded them so skillfully that they didn't hit her. Eli gripped his firing mechanisms, ready to blast these things to doomsday, but before he got a chance, their pursuers' fire smashed into their own craft. Lasers and cannon fire and rockets whizzed past the *Boomerang* and exploded in the horde itself. Dozens erupted in sparks and flying debris.

River muscled the helm around one more time, but she didn't steer in a ring. She traced a random course of loops and dives and spins and dodges. She wheeled everywhere at full throttle, eluding attack.

Eli swung from one side to the other, spraying his fire into the horde. Now he spotted Squadron ships streaming their glowing afterburn across his view. In a second, they filled the whole window. They fired on the spheres, blowing them up by the score, but they didn't scratch the surface of the thousands streaking toward Earth.

The planet loomed huge and blue when River rotated the *Boomerang* that way. Eli caught fleeting snatches of space when the ship tumbled away from the planet. He felt the nauseating tow of gravity trying to pull the *Boomerang* into its field.

"They're targeting us!" Waylon's voice cracked through the intercom and woke Eli from his trance. "Those bastards are targeting us—us! Hey,

shitheads! How ‘bout a little respect, huh? No good deed goes unpunished, I’m telling you.”

The *Boomerang* somersaulted to starboard. She sneaked between two Squadron craft, and Eli saw confirmation of what he’d feared. The Squadron ships trained their fire on Waylon and the *Boomerang*’s tenders. They didn’t understand. They thought the *Boomerang* belonged to the enemy fleet.

He pushed that thought out of his mind. River seemed to be handling the Squadron fighters along with the horde. Eli, on the other hand, had his hands full not to hit them with random fire. He couldn’t just mow down everything in sight anymore. He had to hesitate a fraction of a second before he fired, just to make sure he was destroying one of the spheres instead of...

These were *not* his people. The Squadrons weren’t his allies or his friends. He had to remember that. The *Boomerang* might be saving their sorry asses from the swarm, but when this was all over with, Eli would go back to hating the Squadrons and Earth as much as ever—maybe more.

He poured that resentment and outrage into his hands. He dumped it on the enemy in the form of lasers and lead. He fired without compunction. River hit a rhythm. She didn’t seem to bother anymore to find a coordinated trajectory through the cloud. She rotated this way and that with only two concerns: staying inside the swarm and avoiding collision with ships on both sides.

Eli found his flow, too. His body danced to its own music, picking out enemy ships and firing before he flicked away to find his next victim. He allowed the energy to move him of its own will while he turned his attention to the planet.

Just then, a loud squawk jolted him awake. He glanced down at his console to see a flashing red light. Those fateful words winked up at him: *Laser core at critical level.*

At the same instant, Waylon shrieked in his ear, “I’m running out of lead! We’re sunk!”

Eli didn’t have time to do anything about that now. He still fired as fast as he could squeeze the mechanism. River’s big body dove right and left, and she snarled under her breath every time she yanked the helm. The *Boomerang* followed her movements, and her hair stuck to sweat on the back of her neck.

The *Boomerang* traced another wide loop around the swarm, and the warning signal switched to solid red.

Almost simultaneously, Waylon shrieked like a little girl. "I'm out! I got nothing! Both cannons are empty and the laser is out of power."

River made another pass. Eli fired a few more times, and then it happened. He compressed the trigger and the cannon failed to respond. The console blinked up at him, *Laser core depleted*.

A rocket glanced off the hull, and Waylon screamed. "They're shooting at me! They're trying to kill me!"

Eli had never heard him so scared. A wicked angel on Eli's shoulder chuckled to itself when he imagined getting a recording of that scream for future reference, but he didn't have time.

He stabbed the intercom. "Get inside and get Yasha up here. Hurry!"

Jood spoke up from the engineering station. "You cannot think to detonate the EMP up here. You would disable the Squadrons at the same time."

"Screw it!" River fired back. "Disable 'em. What the hell do we care?"

"You would leave the whole planet undefended. This swarm might be a diversion, or an advanced force designed to leave the planet exposed to a second attack. You cannot know. Whatever you do, Eli, you cannot detonate the EMP where it would put the Squadron in danger."

River bellowed over her shoulder. "What are we supposed to do? If we don't detonate it, they'll attack the planet."

"At least the Squadrons would be active to defend Earth," Jood replied. "We came here to warn the Squadrons. That was our objective. We have accomplished that objective. We cannot reverse that by completely neutralizing the only force protecting the planet."

"Holy hell!" River whipped around and seized the helm. "Hold on!"

The *Boomerang* went into a tailspin. River braced her sturdy legs against the floor, fighting the controls with all her enormous strength, but the *Boomerang* refused to stabilize.

"What's going on?" Eli roared.

"They're...aargh!" Another barrage pounded the hull and hurled everyone forward. River pitched face-first onto the helm before she got the ship under control.

"Talk to me, River!" Eli thundered. "What the hell is going out there?"

He didn't have to ask. Through the window, he watched a line of those spheres marching across the swarm. They didn't head for Earth. They completely ignored it. They cut a vertical course from one side of the horde to the other.

They approached the first Squadron ships, but the enemy didn't fire. Long before they got within range, an invisible barrier touched the Squadron vessels and the Squadron craft burst into flames. One after another, huge cruisers and destroyers went up in catastrophic explosions without ever firing a shot.

Jood and Eli gaped through the window. Eli muttered low, "What the holy hell...?"

Jood looked straight out at the scene without blinking. "They must have some other weapon that..."

A devastating boom resounded inches from the *Boomerang*. The impact rocked the ship. Jood glanced down at his instruments. "Another wave is coming from the other side. They will eat their way through the whole fleet."

"We have to detonate the EMP now!" River yelled. "If they get through the fleet, there won't be anything standing between them and Earth—except us."

The words barely escaped her lips when the spheres launched as one. They didn't wait until the advancing rank blasted its way through the Squadrons. They only opened a space, and they all zipped through it at lightning speed. In a matter of seconds, they funneled through the gap on a beeline for Earth.

River wrenched the *Boomerang* around, but it was too late. Eli could only sit in his chair and stare at all those things diving through the atmosphere. In front of his eyes, the splinter cannons unloaded from Frasier Airbase in Melbourne and the Pacific Defense Battalion Base on Okinawa.

Eli's eye skipped over the marbled curve of the ocean from one military installation to the next. He knew them all too well and he also knew, in the bottom corners of his heart, that none of them had the firepower to take out this horde.

Sure enough, the spheres dodged their fire and scattered across the atmosphere. They set up a net all around the planet, but they didn't fire. Explosions sparkled down on the surface. Flashes of red and orange twinkled through the clouds without the spheres appearing to fire at all, but

that was only an illusion. They were using whatever weapon they'd brought here to destroy Earth.

Jood almost whispered from engineering: "If you plan to deploy the EMP, now would be the most prudent time."

Eli glanced over, but his friend wasn't looking at him. Jood gazed through the window at Earth. Eli read the horrible truth on the Xynnar's face.

Eli shuddered himself awake. "Take us down there, River. Where's Yasha?"

The intercom crackled, and Yasha's voice pierced his brain. "Waylon's hit! I have to stop the bleeding before he..."

"Get up here!" he bellowed back. "I said take us down there, River. Get us as close to the swarm as possible."

River spun her chair around. "If we detonate the EMP, we'll shut down the *Boomerang*, too. If we do that in the atmosphere, we'll crash and burn along with the rest of the horde."

Eli rounded on her, baring his teeth. "Descend! Do it now or I'll do it myself. We don't have much time."

She tucked her chin against her chest and turned her chair away. Eli took a deep breath inside himself. He heard himself firing orders everywhere, and his crew bowing their heads to carry them out. He'd spent the last twenty-five years hoping he'd never do that again.

But the *Boomerang* and her crew of outlaws had gone way beyond the point of no return a long time ago. Prudence and circumspection no longer had any place in Eli's life.

TWENTY-SIX

Annihilation

THE *BOOMERANG* WENT INTO A NOSEDIVE, plummeting toward the atmosphere. Yasha stumbled into the cockpit, supporting herself against the bulkhead. “I’m here. What do you want me to do?”

At that moment, a shockwave hit the *Boomerang* from behind. Eli’s first glance at his console told him all he needed to know. His sensor display showed him the remaining Squadron ships in hot pursuit. They overtook the *Boomerang* and fired on her. They couldn’t destroy all the spheres, so they’d opted for the most convenient target instead.

River grappled with the helm and the *Boomerang* started to divert, but Eli roared at her again. “No! Dive into the heart of the swarm. Do it now!”

She didn’t argue back this time. She flipped the helm and *Boomerang* spiraled parallel to the Squadron’s rocket fire. Eli slammed back in his seat when she hit the throttle for all it was worth. The *Boomerang* jumped and reared.

Jood’s fingers blurred over his instruments. “The Squadron ships are following us. If they maintain their current speed, they will overtake us when we reach the swarm. They will get caught in the EMP anyway.”

“Screw it,” Eli snarled. “It’s their funeral.”

“Eli, I really must protest against this course of...”

“Get into the middle of the net!” Eli spun his chair around to confront Yasha. “Get ready to release the EMP.”

Her eyes popped. “I can’t! I told you I don’t know how to release it. You said you would...”

Another explosion smashed the *Boomerang* to port. “We lost the tender!” River hollered. “We’re losing stability.”

“Maintain speed,” Eli roared. “Don’t cut throttle.”

She didn’t turn around, but he heard her tone change. She didn’t even try to hide it. “We have to, or we’ll plunge straight into the ocean.”

“Do it!” he thundered. “Don’t slow down for anything.”

The *Boomerang* shuddered when she struck the atmosphere. “The starboard tender is hanging by a thread,” Jood informed him. “We will lose propulsion in ten seconds and then we’ll be in freefall at terminal velocity. We will all be dead the instant we hit.”

Eli ignored him. He extended his hand to Yasha. “Come over here. Stand right here next to me.”

She stretched one arm toward him to take his hand, without letting go of the bulkhead. She took a step when another blow shook the ship to its struts. She staggered and crashed down on one knee.

“The Squadrons are overtaking us,” Jood announced. “They cannot hit so many enemies, so they are concentrating their fire on us.”

Eli still didn’t respond. What difference did it make if the Squadrons were firing on the *Boomerang*? That didn’t change anything.

Yasha pushed herself up against the constant back-and-forth concussions of rockets pounding the hull. She put out her hand to grab Eli again when a withering thump smashed into the ship. It felt like it came from directly above, but Eli couldn’t be sure.

“The starboard tender is gone!” River cried. “We’ve got no helm at all. We’re dead in the water.”

Dead in the water. How many times in his checkered career had Eli heard those words? Out in space, *dead in the water* meant stranded in motionless lethargy. *Dead in the water* meant sitting still until you got your engines repaired and restarted.

Those words took on a new meaning several thousand feet above a planet’s surface with the full force of gravity towing you toward the ground. The *Boomerang* whistled through the clouds when another volley

bombarded the tail. The ship tilted sideways with her belly pointed downward.

Eli lost sight of the planet. A perfectly blue field obliterated the window, and the *Boomerang* fell belly first. She shot out from under Eli's seat, and he lifted up too fast to catch himself.

He whizzed upward and smashed his head into the ceiling. At the same moment, another explosion hurtled the ship forward. He rocketed sideways and crashed into the window at the same time River, Jood, and Yasha all landed near him. Their four bodies pounded down on the cruel steel floor, only to get hurled upward again with equal force.

Eli struggled against a wave of vertigo to pry his eyes open. He blinked blood out of his eyes to stare down at his own command chair. The engineering station and the pilot's console were all empty.

An ominous howling noise thundered in his ear. His head hurt something awful, but he commanded himself to look to one side. He came face to face with River's features distorted in a purple mass of bruises. Her damp hair trailed in blood running out of a pulpy gash cutting across her face, but the blood didn't fall toward the floor. It ran off in a curled dribble toward the ceiling.

An arm clothed in blue draped over her waist. The hand dangling from the sleeve showed a strange orange-brown tinge to the skin. Eli blinked at it, and a curious blue color came into view. It traced the cup-shaped wrinkles of the knuckles. Only Xynnar had that coloration on their hands.

He hated to look around any further, but that horrible howling noise made him think twice. What did it mean? Then he caught sight of the cockpit window beyond River's shoulder, and he remembered everything.

A blue-white landscape tilted beyond the glass, and he knew where he was. He was on Earth—at least, he was in the Earth's atmosphere. Yes, there were the spheres. They were firing now. They unloaded their rockets toward the surface. Splinter cannon fire streaked past them. If any shot came near the spheres, they dodged it easily.

Eli hauled his aching head up. Yasha. He had to find Yasha. Breaking the gravitation hold pinning him to the ceiling demanded all his strength. His vision swam, but he forced himself to look around.

He spotted her lying half-twisted against the bulkhead. Her legs splayed on the ceiling and her mouth sagged open. Beyond her, a familiar face

poked through the entrance. Tim crawled forward into the cockpit and his eyes met Eli's.

TWENTY-SEVEN

FOR WHAT SEEMED like a long time, he and Eli regarded each other across Yasha's inert frame. The young doctor didn't say anything, but his eyes said all the awful things he'd said to Eli in the weeks since he and Quinn had come on board the *Boomerang*.

This time was different, though. Those eyes challenged Eli in a way he'd never allowed Tim to challenge him before. Was Eli going to do what he'd promised Quinn he would do, or was he going to sit here while the *Boomerang* crashed into the ocean? It was as simple as that.

Eli pivoted over on his hands and knees. He started the painful crawl toward the bulkhead, but the impossible gravity made every step a battle. Every time he braced his hand against the steel, another impact rocked the vessel. He had to stop and catch his balance before he ventured another excruciating inch.

Tim dragged himself into the cockpit and took Yasha by the shoulders. He started to wrestle her around to get her off the bulkhead. Eli never thought he'd live to see Dr. Tim Knox try to help him, but desperation had a way of putting grudges in perspective.

Moving an unconscious body proved more difficult than moving a conscious one. By the time Eli reached Yasha, Tim had only managed to haul her lower body into alignment. Her cranium still wedged at an angle against the bulkhead, where Eli couldn't reach her.

Working together, the two men knotted their fists in her clothes. They heaved as one and succeeded in dragging her off the wall. Her skull flopped against the ceiling, and Eli put out his hand to slip his fingers behind her neck.

His fingertips brushed her hair when a gut-wrenching tremor seized the *Boomerang*. She slammed downward even harder and flattened Tim and Eli to the ceiling. In a fraction of a second, another impact sent everyone hurtling toward the floor. The blow smashed Eli across the command chair. He pulverized his stomach over the back of the seat and his head struck the footrest. His legs whipped downward and he passed out.

Another hideous crash woke him from his stupor to find himself floating in mid-air. He rotated in a zero-gravity paralysis, suspended in the middle of the cockpit. All his friends swam around him in states of unconsciousness. River floated on her back, and her hair waved in mysterious shapes around her expressionless face. A few feet away, Tim spun in a slow somersault. His face registered no sign of life, and blood ran out of his mouth.

Eli swallowed hard. Now he was alone, more alone than before he knew Tim was still alive and awake and working to help him. He almost lost heart when a hint of movement drew his attention toward the engineering station.

Yasha hovered there with her eyes shut. That howling noise vibrated through the hull louder now. Eli couldn't know how close he was to the horde without checking, and he didn't have time for that.

He looked around for some way to propel himself to her side when another blast sent him tumbling backward. He landed spread-eagled across the window, and River crashed down on top of him with all her bulk.

Another barrage pulverized the *Boomerang* and the force ripped him off the glass. He spun the opposite way, and the bulkhead hurtled toward his eyes. At the last possible second, he wrenched himself sideways and went wheeling in front of Tim. Eli planted his palm against the doctor's chest and pushed. He soared across the cockpit and tackled Yasha as she twirled past him.

He strapped his arms around her chest and hugged her against him as one concussion after another threatened to blast the *Boomerang* apart at the seams. Eli shut his eyes and commanded himself to think. All he had to do was reach up and take hold of the back of her neck, but he couldn't release his hands without risking losing his grip on her.

A splintering crash shocked him into opening his eyes just as a rocket punctured the hull. Sparks showered around him as it ripped the ceiling back and crashed through the floor. The distant howl turned into an ear-

splitting shriek. The wind tore through the hole and another punishing blow knocked him flat.

Eli concentrated everything on keeping his arms around Yasha. He landed hard on the floor with his hands still clasped under her. The pain crushed him, but he didn't care as long as he was near her.

He dragged his arms out from under her and propped himself up. He caught one look at her face, enveloped in slumber. That moment stretched into eternity, and he crossed into a surreal dream without time. He slipped his hand under her shoulder blades and up to her neck. His fingers closed around the back of her skull, and a world-shaking blast flooded into him.

For a second, he found himself back on the lawn with the dog. Yasha's mother called her from the porch, and Eli turned around to look up at her. In front of his eyes, the house crumbled into a billion tiny flecks of color. The paroxysm spread to the entire scene. The sky, the trees, the fence, the grass, even the dog dissolved into a swirling vapor of colored specks.

They wavered in an indistinct haze for a moment. Then, with stunning speed, they compressed and reassembled into a forest at night. Insect noises clicked and rasped out of sight. A moon gleamed down through the branches. Eli heard through Yasha's ears the sounds of footsteps coming closer.

He looked down and saw a gun clasped in his hands—but they weren't his hands. They were Yasha's. He crouched and tiptoed into the trees, heading toward those footsteps.

When he scanned the surroundings, the trees and bushes started to dissolve the way the house had. Millions of tiny scraps of color rotated in a confused swirl of nothing.

At that moment, a bone-crunching bang hit him and he snapped to the open air. He materialized outside the *Boomerang* just in time to see one of those spheres glance off the nose. The *Boomerang* pivoted off one way, and the sphere got hurled in the opposite direction.

Just for a second, Eli caught sight of the whole array of spheres spread around the Earth. He withdrew his attention to Yasha. For some reason, she lay underneath him out here in the tearing wind, but they weren't lying down with him on top of her. She hung vertically between his arms with his hand still clasped behind her neck.

He focused his mental power on her sleeping face, and sent her a silent command beyond words. This was it. She had to do it now if she was going

to do it at all.

At that instant, the whole world imploded, and a ruinous discharge pounded into his brain. It fired him into unconsciousness and his hand released.

TWENTY-EIGHT

ELI WOKE up and stared at the ceiling above him. Through the ragged hole of twisted metal and distorted structural members, he gazed at clouds streaming across a blue sky. Just for a second, all the tension and fear and anger from the last twenty-five years drained out of him. He relaxed into that beautiful sight. It soothed him into a blessed delirium where nothing could ever bother him again.

A high-pitched scream startled him out of his reverie. Beyond the breach, a rocket coiled its vapor trail across his sight, followed by an enormous Squadron destroyer. It blinked in front of him for only a second, and he recognized it. It was the *Nautilus*, the namesake for a class of ship on a scale that dwarfed his first command. A half-dozen *Devilfish* could sit inside her hold.

He shot up on puppet strings and whipped to his right. The cockpit window rotated back and forth in a mindless swing. Sections of land tilted across the view, intermixed with the deep blue of ocean.

He ignored the pain radiating all over his body as he flung himself into the command chair and seized the controls. He punched the throttle, but of course nothing happened. Neither tender would respond.

Eli gritted his teeth and swallowed down the urge to lose his mind. His instincts told him to call for Jood or River or...anybody, but he wouldn't be calling on anybody today. They all lay immobile around him. Their blood stained the floor—*his* floor.

He clamped his lips tight together. Very deliberately, he dragged his eyes to the window. He refused to look away, clenching his fists around the controls.

He dragged the helm into some semblance of stability, but without the tenders, it all came down to muscle against the force of gravity, towing him down to his destruction.

The rudder flapped before it obeyed him. The wind jerked it in all directions. Every time it wavered, the *Boomerang* tumbled to one side or the other, and he had to start over from zero.

Eli's arms ached, but he kept his grip on the helm. He nudged the ailerons, and the *Boomerang* veered at a revolting angle. She almost spun completely out of control, but by luck and effort, he held them steady and the nose lifted.

He commanded himself to stay calm and concentrate against the gravity smashing him back in his seat. They should have already crashed into the blue planet below. Yasha's pulse had shifted them spatially somehow, but whether that was a good or bad thing was yet to be determined.

He inched the ailerons another micron upward, and the *Boomerang* angled her nose another dangerous inch. The next minute, she jerked up hard and rocketed level with the ground. The ship boomed over the sound barrier and hurtled faster than her fullest throttle speed, but at least she was running parallel to the ground instead of pointed at it.

Eli fought the helm, straining his every fiber to hold her steady. He dodged mountains and more Squadron ships hanging in mid-air. Explosions went off all around him, but he didn't see any spheres—not that he had a chance to look very hard.

A landmass whizzed toward him—he didn't know which one, and he didn't care. The *Boomerang* rocked on the breeze, burning over millions of miles. How long would she keep running before she crashed in a plume of fire?

All too soon, the ocean sped up underneath the window. Every time the ship wavered, she threatened to point her nose into the drink. He cursed her speed now. The ailerons shuddered and the rudder cable snapped. The rudder banged again, but the *Boomerang* was speeding too fast to make any difference. The rudder hovered somewhere in the middle, and did nothing to break her headlong sprint across the planet.

How would he know if she started to lose altitude? He took a risk and glanced down at his console. His stomach turned when he saw the reading. She was already losing precious height. She would crash any second. The only question was when...and where.

Eli made up his mind. He adjusted the ailerons ever so slightly. He tipped her nose downward by a fraction of an inch. He dropped to within a few feet of the waves before he leveled her out.

The next time he checked his display, he saw the speed reducing faster than he'd expected. This couldn't go on. He tweaked the ailerons by the smallest margin and she dropped belly-down on the waves.

The water shrieked against the hull. Every bump and swell rattled Eli's teeth in their sockets. His nerves frayed to tatters, and his arms trembled with the strain of fighting her every inch of the way.

Two huge fountains of spray blasted up from both tenders. The sea ripped at the hull. Was there anything left to this ship at all?

He nearly dislocated his shoulders holding her level, and he dreaded the moment he hit land again. A range of mountains stabbed the horizon, but at that moment, a particularly large wave bounced the ship upward a few inches. She crashed down and wobbled to port. The ruined tender brushed the waves and the world caved in.

The water caught the tender. The *Boomerang* listed and toppled into a headlong cartwheel. The tender plunged into the drink and she shot up on her nose. The next minute, she tumbled end over end across the surface. Her forward momentum carried her without slowing.

The next time the port tender struck, the ship flipped upward. She vaulted skyward. A shade of dark green covered the window, and Eli flung his arms in front of his face for protection. She slammed down hard and everything went silent.

He sat still, listening to the torturous rasp of his own breathing in his lungs. His heart hammered into his ribs, drumming to beat the band. No amount of stillness could ever calm him down. The silence alone drove him insane.

Nothing happened. No explosions startled him. He peeked out from under his arms to stare at a utopian world of trees waving on a sandy, sun-washed beach. Glorious crystal waves kissed the shore and hissed back in undulating curves. The sun sparkled on the wet sand and the tree branches swayed in a gentle, soothing breeze.

Eli dragged his awareness out of the clouds to his predicament. He sat stunned and frozen in the *Boomerang's* command chair. Smoke floated through the cockpit. In front of his eyes, the engineering console burst into a shower of sparks. The instruments blinked once and died.

Bodies littered the cockpit floor. As if for the first time, Eli became aware of a spiderweb crack shattering the window. He had to look through the distorted fracture to see the idyllic view outside.

The unmistakable lap of waves brushed the *Boomerang's* hull, but the beach scene didn't rise and fall. It just sat there without moving. Eli struggled to understand what was going on. He didn't hear any screeches of tearing metal, or the thump of cannon fire. He didn't hear anything. The world sounded unnaturally silent. Had he gone deaf in the battle? He wouldn't be surprised.

Just then, a bunch of dark shapes crossed his view. Men carrying weapons ran onto the beach and stopped. They pointed at the *Boomerang*.

TWENTY-NINE

MORE MEN APPEARED beyond the window. They gesticulated to each other and ran back and forth. Their behavior made no sense to him at all. If they'd come here to arrest him or put him in front of the firing squad, why stand around prolonging the inevitable?

Eli shook himself out of his shock. He could feel the seat under him now. It no longer held him in place.

He hauled himself out of it, and the pain and astonishment of everything that happened almost knocked him to the ground. He teetered to catch his balance, but his shattered mind moved at a snail's pace. He looked up through the hull breach at the sky. How could a sky be so incredibly blue after all the explosions and adrenaline of a few moments before? His system didn't want to return to normal. He kept expecting a cannon to blast him into outer space at any second.

He extended his arms and grabbed the torn edges of the hull. He jumped and hoisted himself through the hole. He flopped on his belly and almost disemboweled himself on the ragged edge.

When he finally pulled himself to his feet on top of the *Boomerang*, he stared all around him in blank incomprehension. The ship sat in about three feet of water. She perched on the sandy bottom. The waves didn't come up past the tenders. Up and down the beach, those men darted among hundreds of spheres smoking on the sand. Craters surrounded them, and the men paid them no attention at all.

A sonic boom made him turn around. The *Nautilus* hovered over the wide ocean, and a salty breeze stung Eli's nostrils. He was back on Earth, all right. Shouts drew him back to the beach. More people gathered. They

shouted at him, and a few waved him toward the shore. This was the fate he'd agreed to when he'd made Quinn that promise. They would clap him in chains and throw him in the brig while they decided on the most torturous execution method for him.

Eli let out a shaky breath. His ribs and diaphragm didn't seem to be working right. They pinched every time he breathed. He braced his arm across them and slid down the hull waves. He landed up to his knees in seawater. He might have spent the last decade and a half running away, but those days were over. If this was what Quinn wanted for him, then he could accept it.

He waded up the beach. He blinked at a bunch of men rushing the other way. They plunged into the ocean and surrounded the *Boomerang*, all scrambling up at once. More carried stretchers between them, and positioned themselves ready to carry away the wounded.

Eli turned around to stare at them while he made his way the rest of the way onto the sand. He'd barely turned to face front when a dozen men charged him, all shouting at once. In half a second, they closed him in a jostling, shoving mass of humanity. They drew him up on the beach and clapped him on the back.

He blinked up at blurry faces. His eyes wouldn't focus. The men all talked at once in some language he didn't understand. He reached up and rubbed his face. Sand and water mixed with blood and sweat and snot and who knew what else came away. But his vision cleared. He could read the expressions on their faces. They broke away to point out to sea before they surrounded him again. They clasped his hands and his vision went blurry again.

A stretcher passed him. He caught a fleeting glimpse of Waylon with a mask over his face. Another one appeared with Yasha. Eli looked behind him. The *Nautilus* hovered on the horizon. It brought up such a mixture of feelings, Eli didn't know what to think.

He never thought he'd ever set foot on Earth again. He certainly didn't think it would play out like this.

All at once, he became aware that the men around him had stopped talking. When he checked behind him, he saw the crowd thinning out. A tall man with narrow, slanted eyes and dark hair strode between the men to stop in front of Eli. He wore a Squadron uniform with captain's bars on the lapel. His name badge read *Fukuoka*, and a patch on his sleeve showed a

familiar spiral of orange and cream. Underneath, gold thread etched a single word into the navy fabric: *Nautilus*.

He examined Eli with penetrating intensity. He opened his mouth in slow motion and spoke in impeccable English. "If you'll come with me, Captain, I'll show you where you can sit down while the doctor attends to your injuries."

For a second, Eli didn't understand him, either. His mind recognized that he was injured, but he didn't seem to be able to move.

Captain. This man was a captain, and he'd called Eli *Captain*.

Eli wanted to correct him, but he didn't have the strength. He just nodded as Fukuoka turned sideways and waved behind him in an attitude of having all the time in the world. Eli took a deep breath and fell in next to Fukuoka.

"The others?" Eli rasped.

"Already pulled clear. My people are doing what they can now." He glanced at Eli. "You were the only one who managed to ... walk away."

That left a bitter taste in Eli's mouth. If anyone had died while he'd walked away he wouldn't be able to live with himself.

As if reading his thoughts, Fukuoka said, "I have no reports of life-threatening injuries as of now."

Eli quickly ran down the crew roster as they crossed the beach. Fukuoka touched his ear and spoke quietly for a moment, then nodded. "We have everyone. All alive."

Eli nodded. It was more than he could have hoped for. The captain diverted toward the trees. The farther he walked, the more Eli's mind cleared. He was walking side by side with the captain of the *Nautilus*. In a way, this moment brought full circle the cycle that had begun when Eli left Earth.

Beyond the tree line, a camp was springing up. Soldiers pitched tents and erected tables everywhere. They scurried in all directions, talking a mile a minute.

The captain conducted Eli to one of the tents. He exchanged a few words with one of the soldiers and gestured toward Eli.

The man approached Eli with his hand out. "Welcome. I am Doctor Li. Please, take a seat so I can examine your head."

The minute those words crossed Li's lips, Eli felt bruises around his jaw, neck, and temple. His skull throbbed, but he hadn't noticed it until

now. Still, he found it impossible to react.

He scanned the doctor up and down. “You’re not the doctor on the *Nautilus*. You’re not wearing a Squadron uniform.”

Dr. Li smiled. “I’m not in the Squadrons. One of the spheres landed in the ocean and started a small wave. It flooded a nearby village. The primary medical team from the *Nautilus* is busy treating the injured there. I work in a hospital in Manila. The *Nautilus* picked me up along with several others from the local disaster team.”

Eli blinked at him. Had he lost time? It had seemed like only a moment. He felt his injuries catching up with him. They screamed pain at him all over his body. He wouldn’t be able to remain standing much longer, but an invisible hand held him rigid and upright. He’d probably stay standing up until he toppled. He just couldn’t bring himself to collapse. “So that’s where I am? The Philippines?”

Dr. Li bit back a tiny smile and nodded. “You’re on Polillo Island, east of the Philippines.”

Eli looked around him one more time. He tottered on his heels again. He only hoped he could avoid falling into the doctor or the captain, to save them the embarrassment.

The doctor motioned behind Eli, who looked back and saw a bench sitting there. It had materialized out of nowhere, and it looked almost painfully inviting. He didn’t have to hold himself together anymore. He’d done what Quinn had asked him to do. Now he could sit down and let someone else take over.

The doctor steered him toward the bench. Eli managed to lower himself onto it without falling on his face. As soon as he sat down, the energy drained from his body. His eyes came to rest on the ground. Once they did that, they remained fixed there. He couldn’t imagine ever looking at anything else again as long as he lived.

Dr. Li knelt down in front of him and started doing something to Eli’s face, but he didn’t feel even that. Fractured memories of explosions and weapons fire replayed in his mind, and left him shocked and deaf to everything. He saw the doctor’s lips moving, but his mind drifted far away to some other world.

Fukuoka rested his hand on Eli’s shoulder and squeezed. Then he walked away.

THIRTY

Two Weeks Later

ELI GAZED across the Pacific Defense Battalion Base. This vantage point on top of the flight platform gave him a perfect, unobstructed view of thousands of ships parked on the dispatch lanes. Tiny cutters and speed scouts dotted the tarmac between enormous destroyers and freight vessels. Their shiny hulls glittered in the sunshine.

For the thousandth time since he'd wound up here, Eli experienced a confused turmoil of emotions and impressions. His memory carried him back to his boyhood, when he'd dreamed of nothing else but becoming the captain of one of those ships. He'd fantasized about piloting one of them into space and battling the enemies of Earth.

All tangled up with that, he still nursed smoldering resentment and bitter enmity toward the Squadrons. Coming back here brought it all back, along with the heart-wrenching agony from his first days of exile.

Yet another part of him could admire all these ships and the crews that manned them. They really were stunning in their power and majesty. He loved each and every one of them as only a soldier and ship's captain could really love a ship. He longed to fly each one, to get to know their idiosyncrasies and their unique capabilities.

That would never happen. He had the *Boomerang*, and that was enough. When he turned around to look at her, he admired her more than all the other ships in known space. He loved her because she was his. He'd never let her down, even if she was getting a little over the hill—just like himself.

She gleamed with the fresh brushstrokes of the welders' buffers, which had repaired her tenders and put her back together. They'd done a damned sight better job than Eli and Waylon and Jood and River ever could, but they couldn't completely erase the ravages of age and rough treatment.

Even so, Eli thanked the stars he was taking off in her and not in any of the other impressive craft parked on those dispatch lanes. She spoke to him, and he understood her language. He hoped he never flew in another craft as long as he lived.

While she sat in a hangar with fitters and welders crawling all over her, the crew had spent the last two weeks in the hospital, recovering from their many and varied injuries. After Captain Fukuoka had shared a few hushed words with the base admiral, the admiral had arranged to house the delinquents in a private wing devoid of any other patients. Whether he did this to protect the crew of the *Boomerang* or the other patients, Eli never really knew.

They'd tried to separate Jood from the rest of them, but Eli had threatened to burn the building down. In the end, they'd just put the entire group of them under armed guard. Other than that, they left Eli and his people completely to their own devices. They never had to deal with anyone besides the medical personnel—until now, that is.

When the neurologists had scanned Yasha's brain for injury, they found an electronic device implanted in her brain stem. They refused to explain its function to her or Eli or anyone else. They wouldn't even let Eli see it. It vanished before she left the operating theater, never to be seen or heard of again, but at least they removed it. Yasha hadn't had another seizure since she'd woken up from the sedative.

Jood, River, Waylon, and Yasha sat in a row on the guard rail, waiting for Eli. When he surveyed them one after another, he suffered a poignant ache of pride in his middle that he was flying with such a fine crew. He was grateful to be taking to the air with each and every one of them, including Yasha. He never had to worry about her detonating her psychic weapon on him or the *Boomerang* again.

Waylon elbowed Jood in the side. “Aw, come on, Jood. What’s wrong with you? Don’t you know how many prostitutes they have over in Manila? You and me could tear that damned town apart before Lover Boy gets back. We have enough money to drink ourselves into a coma. Where’s your sense of adventure?”

Jood sat bolt upright on the guard rail at Waylon’s side and didn’t turn to look at him. “I do not know how many prostitutes reside in Manila, but I am quite certain that you do, Waylon. Need I remind you that Xynnar are not susceptible to alcohol? Besides, I am afraid I don’t consider an escapade of that kind enough of an adventure to hold my interest. I say nothing against your tastes, you understand. If that class of adventure appeals to you, you should go ahead.”

Waylon smacked his lips and turned away. “None of you is any fun. Let me guess. You consider that stunt of attacking a horde of alien vessels and getting shot out of the sky enough of an adventure to hold your interest. It really is sad, you know.”

River spoke up from Jood’s other side. “I thought you left all your money at the Epsilon Outpost. You don’t have a red cent on you to spend in Manila. You’re blowing hot air out of your ass as usual, Waylon.”

Waylon turned toward Yasha, who occupied the place to his left. “What about you? Don’t you want to tie one on in Manila before you waste the rest of your life out in space? Come on, don’t leave me hanging here. Please tell me I’m not the only person on this pathetic old crew who knows how to have a good time.”

Yasha indulged in a smile that showed all her perfect white teeth. She smiled so easily now. She joked and teased Waylon mercilessly. “I’ve been known to tie one on in my time—in Manila and elsewhere. After the Battle of St. Petersburg, we used to drive into town every other day and get smashed in the bars before we’d drag our asses back to base. That was the only way we could get up the courage to face the next day’s fighting. Do you know five of my squadmates lost their lives not from enemy fire, but from crashing their Jeeps on the road when they were too shitfaced to drive?”

Waylon slapped his thighs and hooted. “Now that’s what I’m talking about! Finally, someone I can talk to. Come on. Let’s go grab a drink right now. These duds will never know we’re gone.”

Yasha burst into a grin, but it faded in a second when a door opened to one side of the flight platform. Everybody stiffened, and Eli turned around to meet Dr. Tim Knox.

THIRTY-ONE

TIM STRODE across the platform wearing his Squadrons uniform. The sight twisted Eli's guts. All this time, he'd never really considered Tim a soldier. He'd treated Tim and his opinions with no more consideration than he'd give a passing stranger on the street.

Now he had no choice but to acknowledge that the man in front of him really was a soldier. He was a doctor in the Squadrons, but Eli already knew that.

The one thing he wasn't anymore was his daughter's fiancé. At the thought of Quinn, Eli pictured her broken, bloody face looking up at him. He pushed the image away. He'd have to deal with that memory someday, but not now.

Tim halted in front of Eli. "Sorry it took so long. I've been in front of the Judge Advocate for the last four hours, but they won't budge. Admiral Wescott is on the panel. As long as he continues to maintain his innocence, there's nothing we can do."

"That's all right," Eli told him. "It's nothing more than we expected. I'm grateful to you for trying."

Tim winced. "I convinced them to waive prosecution in light of the extenuating circumstances, as long as you leave Earth immediately. I'm sorry I couldn't do better than that. If we try to get Wescott prosecuted, they'll go after you first. All of you will get convicted and sentenced long before they even consider the evidence against Wescott. As it stands, it would be Yasha's word against his. I'm really sorry, but I suggest you take the deal."

“We’ll take it.” Eli jerked his thumb over his shoulder. “Thanks for this. It’s good to see her up and ready to fly again.”

Tim shrugged. “It was the least they could do. She’s a good ship. She deserves a few more parsecs before you put her out to pasture.”

Eli willed himself to look dead into the young man’s eyes. “What I mean is...thank you. I know I haven’t always been the best bedfellow. I appreciate everything you’ve done—for all of us. I owe you a big one.”

Tim’s gaze skated sideways toward the ships lined up in the lanes. “It’s me who should be thanking you. I misjudged you. You really pulled it out there at the end. I didn’t think you would, and that was a mistake. I’m sorry.” He paused. “Nobody on that panel wants to admit it, but there’s no way any of us can express our gratitude to you for what you did. I only wish I could do more so you didn’t have to leave again. You deserve better.”

Eli nodded over Tim’s shoulder toward the door. “You’d better be careful around here. Wescott will come after you next, now that he knows you know his secret.”

“I’ll be all right,” Tim replied. “When I was in there addressing the panel, I saw fear in his eyes. He’s worried.”

“You’d be better off coming with us. You’d be more than welcome.”

Tim didn’t blink. “I appreciate that, but my place is here. Besides, someone has to stay here and keep an eye on him from inside the Squadrons. Maybe he’ll slip up again and I’ll be able to prove what he’s up to.”

“Suit yourself. My offer still stands.”

Tim’s cheeks colored. “Thanks, but I don’t think I’m cut out for your line of work.”

Eli smiled. “You don’t say.”

Tim snorted, but in a second, he locked his eyes on Eli and the smile faded off his lips. “If you need anything, you let me know. Whatever happens, you have a friend in the Squadrons. Don’t forget that.”

“I won’t.” Eli held out his hand, but Tim ignored it and embraced him. Eli clapped the young man on the back. “You take care of yourself.”

Tim pushed him back. His eyes sparkled with moisture. “You, too. Fly safe out there.”

Eli headed for the *Boomerang*. One by one, the others marched up the ramp, and the hatch shut behind them. Eli went to the cockpit and sat down in the command chair. River took the helm, and Jood got behind the

engineering console. Waylon and Yasha buckled into their seats behind the bulkhead.

Through the window, Eli watched Tim retreat beyond the guard rail. Then he turned around and remained there in plain sight while the tenders fired up. River lifted off, and Eli held up his hand. Tim waved to him through the window, and the base slipped out of sight.

The *Boomerang* ascended, and all sight of Earth vanished. The horizon teetered for a second. Eli stole one last look at the rounded curve of the planet. After all the conflicting emotions of the last few days and weeks, he didn't know exactly what he felt about leaving Earth so soon.

He didn't need to know. He was going back into space, which, when he thought about it, was where he belonged, too. He never really was cut out to live on Earth. Out there, beyond the stars, he knew his ground. He knew the rules. As long as the *Boomerang* kept flying, he and his crew would keep plying the trade lanes and the outposts of distant planets and moons. They would keep earning a living with speed and cannon, the way they always did.

Jood spoke up from his station. "We are clear of the platform. We are clear to launch."

"Hit it," Eli said.

River slammed the throttle all the way forward, and the *Boomerang* streaked over the horizon and into the dark embrace of space.

EPILOGUE

Two months later

“WHAT THE HELL WAS THAT?” Eli spun the command console around as a scorching splinter cannon round blasted off the *Boomerang*’s hull.

“We are being fired upon,” Jood said matter-of-factly.

Of course we are, Eli thought. The one constant in the universe was its unswerving need to punish anyone with a plan.

“Think they know about the new job?” Waylon asked. “Or is this just bad luck?”

“Yes,” Eli said.

River and Jood attacked their instruments. The conversation they’d been engaged in, something about a bet that had lasted since they’d left Earth months ago, died in an instant.

“Where did this bastard come from?” River snarled.

“Who is it?” Eli asked.

“We cannot pick up any identity signature coming from the vessel,” Jood said. “Our detectors cannot penetrate the ship’s scramble cloud.”

Eli whipped back the other way to stare at him. “Scramble cloud? That’s impossible. Only the Allied Squadrons’ ships use scramble clouds.”

Jood didn't look up. His fingers flew in a blur over the engineering station. "It cannot be a Squadrons ship in this sector, and it is using vapor combustion tenders."

The *Boomerang* shuddered as another bombardment of cannon fire ricocheted off the port side.

"Get us out of here, River!"

"I'm trying, but there's—" An explosive concussion hit the ship from behind. The *Boomerang* lurched forward and tossed everyone out of their seats. River slammed down on the console in front of her and the engines spluttered.

"Hit it, River!" Eli boomed. "Just do it!"

She slapped her hand onto the controls and the *Boomerang* took a flying leap. In a split second, it rocketed into the distance. The momentum flung everyone backward.

"Where is he?" Eli said over his shoulder. "Is he falling behind?"

A punishing blow answered him—from starboard this time. "How far are we below full throttle, River?" Eli called across the cockpit.

She growled through gritted teeth again, but she didn't answer. She hurled the helm hard to starboard. The *Boomerang* careened in a wild arc, tumbling over on her side. She tilted all the way onto her back before Eli saw the huge looming green surface of a planet in front of them.

River pounded the helm harder than ever. The *Boomerang* streaked into a dangerous plunge and zoomed around the planet. It grazed the atmosphere as seven more rapid flashes zipped under the *Boomerang's* belly.

"River..." Eli warned.

"Shut up and let me fly her, will ya?"

Eli frowned but said nothing as River concentrated all her power on wrestling the helm in wild looping swirls.

The ship had been overhauled in almost every way imaginable on Earth. She was even faster than she'd been before.

The *Boomerang* dipped and dived between unknown moons and asteroids. Eli lost track of where they were, and he didn't care as long as River didn't crash his ship into some rock at the ass-end of space.

"They know how to fly," Jood said. "They're keeping pace with us."

Eli clenched his jaws. He didn't bother to mention that the continuous thumps of cannon on the aft end already told him that.

All at once, Eli shot out of his chair. He jabbed his forefinger at the window. “There, River! The Kitiuk Outpost!”

“I must point out, Eli,” Jood intoned, “that the Kitiuk Outpost issued a warrant for our arrest after we abandoned Keld Jawid there.”

“You don’t have to remind me,” Eli said.

At that moment, a scream shook the ship and another craft whizzed over the cockpit window. It raced away ahead of them. Eli’s heart sank when the strange ship slowed in front of the window, pivoted, and faced the *Boomerang*.

“So much for the Kitiuk Outpost,” River muttered.

Yasha stumbled around the bulkhead and leaned against the doorway. “What the hell is going on?”

No one replied. Eli opened his mouth to say something, but he never got a chance. The two vapor combustion tenders on either side of the strange vessel started to glow. Four more cannons detached from its lower hull and locked into position.

River jabbed her console and the *Boomerang* blasted straight forward. The surge pinned Eli into his chair. He had to fight just to hold his head upright. At the same instant, the enemy unleashed all his weapons at once.

Eli gulped hard, but he should have known better. The *Boomerang* teetered in a perilous, circuitous course, dodging one blast after the other. River’s heavy jowls quivered with the force with which she stabbed the console.

Eli started to feel sick to his stomach, but he resolutely refused to say anything when he noticed River steering toward the Kitiuk Outpost. He didn’t care if the Outpost Detachment *did* arrest him, as long as they stopped this stranger from destroying his ship.

“We’re three REMs out,” Jood announced. “If we can get around the—” A brutal smash cut him off. Just as fast, he started speaking again. “They got the port strut. They are targeting the tenders. One more hit like that and we’ll lose propulsion. If we cannot get near enough to the Outpost, we will never be able to ...”

Eli didn’t wait to hear anymore. “Transfer weapons control,” he said as he plunged his hands into the ports on his console. He’d rather run from trouble than try to shoot his way through it, but sometimes there wasn’t a choice.

The lasers took half a second to lock into position. The next instant, he unloaded on the enemy, firing all his cannons at once.

The unidentified ship opened up at the same moment, but River pirouetted around another nameless moon. The stranger's guns smashed into the surface and the *Boomerang* peppered its sides a glancing blow.

Jood's fingers hung suspended over the engineering console. "You knocked out his scramble cloud, Eli."

"I did?" Eli was as surprised as anyone. The *Boomerang's* weapons systems had been upgraded on Earth, too. Maybe it was time to start rethinking his run-first strategy.

"The identity signal is coming through." Jood glanced up, not at Eli, but at the Kitiuk Outpost veering ever closer beyond the window. "It is a Squadron vessel. It is the *Dmitri*."

Eli wheeled around, too stunned to think straight. "That's impossible."

Jood dipped his eyes back to his console. "There is a message coming through from the outpost. It is an encoded hailing frequency."

"Can you decipher it?" Eli asked, wondering why the outpost would do that.

Jood's fingers danced over his console. "It is an advanced encryption, but I believe so."

A confused jumble of static squawked from the intercom. All mixed up in the noise, Eli very distinctly made out the words "...in front of her...cut her off...can't let her near the Outpost..."

Eli froze. "What the hell?" It was obvious the message was meant for the *Dmitri*, not the *Boomerang*. "Are you sure that's from the outpost?"

"It's through her relay," Jood said. "But there is no origin header embedded in the message."

Through the racket and din of cannons pounding the hull, Eli barely heard Yasha hiss behind his ear. "That's *him*, the bastard. I'd know that voice anywhere."

Eli turned to look at her. "Who?"

Yasha's expression was pure rage. "Wescott," she snarled.

[FIND OUT](#)

WHAT HAPPENS
NEXT!

Click here to read
VENGEANCE!
(Outcast Starship Book 2)

STUFF AT THE END

Hey there reader, it's Joshua. I hope you enjoyed the first book in the Outcast Starship series!

Daniel and I aim with this series to create something like the classic science fiction serials of yesteryear. To blend the swashbuckling bravado of Flash Gordon with the knowing coolness of Buck Rogers.

Not sure we got there, but we're working on it!

Fans of my pulp-heavy newsletter, **The Reader Crew**, know that I'm a sucker for classic Golden Age science fiction. From the 30s and 40s pulp magazines, with their short stories and serials, right through to the paperback craze of the 50s and 60s, I *love* what the future looked like in the past.

And because of that, I thought it would be fun to link to a story from that era I love so much.

Please enjoy a free copy of [Suicide Rocket right here.](#)



Four freighters in the convoy blow up with tremendous force

Swicide Rocket

by MANLY
WADE WELLMAN

"IF MARS knew of this G-takeoff, she'd bomb St. Louis till there wasn't even a flea alive on a rat," grumbled the ground sergeant, watching freighter after freighter into space.

"Mars doesn't dare," replied the ground-major. "She'll only wait for the fleet to clear, and bomb that. Nobody expects a single hull to come out anywhere near Jupiter."

"No?" the ground-sergeant looked stupid. "What then?"

"We'll fire another bunch," replied the ground-major grimly. "Tell them to load those black ships into the take-off."

"I get it," said the ground-sergeant suddenly. "Black ships—hard to see

in 'tween-world space—but why is this convoy all burnished? Do they want the Martians to see—"

"Exactly," nodded his superior. "They want the Martians to see. Concentrate. And the black convoy, really freighted for our Jovian colonies, will get through . . . there goes the last ship. Destroyer. Don't think it won't do plenty of destroying before it gets destroyed."

CAPTAIN KILRAIN, young and as spare as a spider, struck the "full ahead" combination on the destroyer's control keys and relaxed in the operator's chair. On the shoulders of his tunic shone brand-new double bars, in-

CAPTAIN KILRAIN knew that there would be no returning from this convoy, because he knew what the freighters were carrying . . .

This is a great example of one of the everyday stories that filled the pages of pulp magazines in the 30s and 40s. It was written by Manly Wade Wellman and appeared inside the March 1942 issue of *Amazing Stories*.

At its heart are classic American protagonists: chest-thumping, red-meat-eating men willing to put it all on the line because it's the right thing to do. Call it the blue-collar roots of modern science fiction.

I hope you get as much of a kick out of it as I did.

—Joshua James

P.S. Seriously, if you enjoy old pulpy goodness, you'll love **The Reader Crew**. (You should [totally sign up for free](#).)

P.P.S. If you'd prefer to go straight to *Vengeance!* (*Outcast Starship Book 2*) and find out what happens to Eli and Yasha and the rest, [just click here!](#)

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